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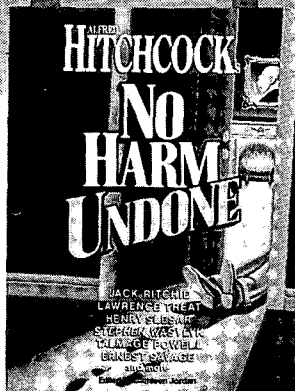
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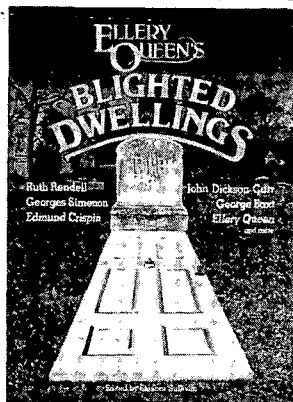
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In the last several issues, as you may have seen, a notice has appeared regarding a mystery cruise sponsored by Davis Publications (that's us) and *Omni* magazine. It occurred to us that though we do a number of other things here besides putting out magazines, things like the mystery cruise, some of our readers might not be aware of that and might be interested.

What other things? Well, twice-yearly anthologies, for instance, which are sold at newsstands. We've published twenty-five of them to date.

And audio cassettes containing stories from AHMM, stories with a supernatural bent, produced by Listen for Pleasure in a series titled *Tales of Suspense*.

Going abroad? Versions of AHMM or the anthologies can be found in various ports of call in case you want to brush up your foreign language abilities with something from home.

Looking for a good gift? In recent years Galahad Books has been bringing out, at wonderful discounts, big omnibus editions based on past anthologies.

And for readers with difficulties with their vision, a number of large-print editions of various AHMM anthologies have been published by John Curley & Associates.

So, what with one thing and another, we—and our subsidiary rights department—manage to stay busy and off the streets. And then, there's always the magazine to put out. . . .

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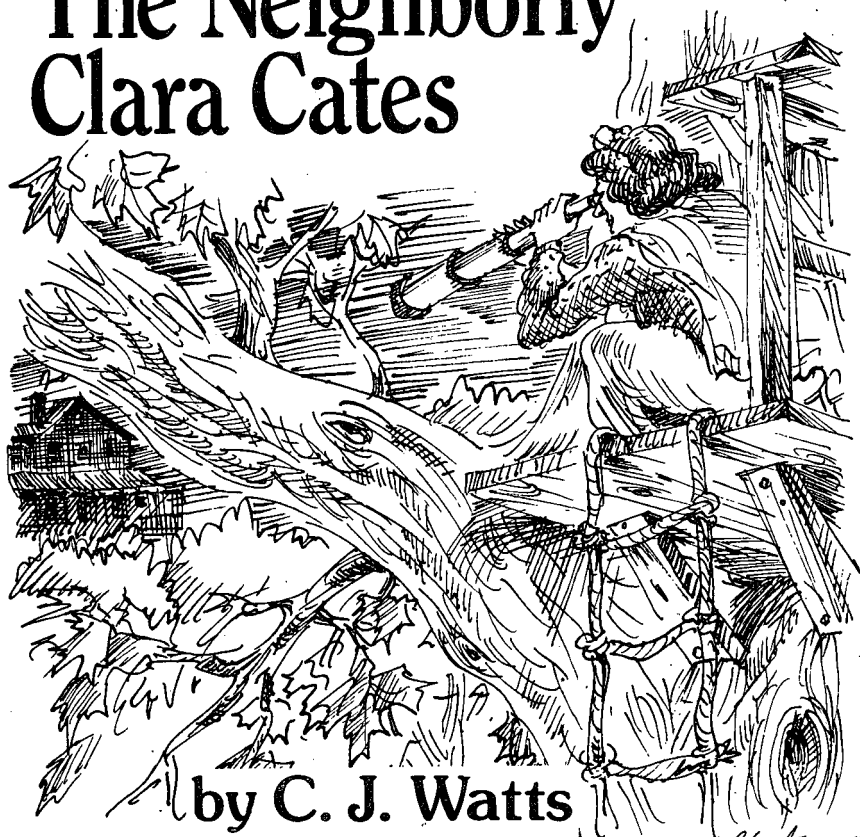
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FICTION

The Neighborly Clara Cates



by C. J. Watts

Blaustein 1988

It all started when our neighbor Skyler Funk cut his leg real bad and decided to give up farming.

It's not like Skyler's farm was a booming concern. He had about eighty acres, most of it in woods and marsh and the rest in apple and peach trees, some grapes, and a huge truck garden. He'd let my kids "help"

him at his fruit stand, and all of us picked for him when his apples and peaches came in season. Old Skyler never had much, and his house was a drafty, run-down piece of real estate. His heart was too good and his hearing was too bad for him to be much of a businessman.

And Skyler was just about the windiest person I ever met.

To hear him talk, the Gambles Mill of fifty years ago was crawling with bears and bobcats and the river had trout as big as a small child. His wife had done the work of three men and he'd had a pair of oxen that she'd kept in line with gingerbread cookies and a two-by-four. Anything the world had or did now was a shadowy representation of Skyler's early manhood. You couldn't really question the man, either. For one thing, he never quit talking. For another, he couldn't hear you if you tried. And finally, he considered anyone under sixty years of age a mere babe in the woods.

But he was a good-hearted and generous soul and that's what concerned me so much when I heard he was to sell the farm.

"Don't you think we ought to talk to him?" I asked my husband Cloyd.

"About what? Even if he could hear us, he wouldn't listen. He thinks we're about as bright as a burned-out light bulb."

"Oh, come on, Cloyd, we don't want the man to be cheated by some slimy lawyer just 'cause he drives you a bit crazy."

"A *bit* crazy?" Cloyd's feet came off the porch railing and hit the floor. "It's bad enough I ask him the time and he tells me he's fine, but last time I

helped him with that old tractor of his I had to hear how wrong I was doing everything. It wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't so nice about it." Cloyd cleared his throat and imitated Skyler's voice. "'You doin' your best there, boy. You just keep that up.' Even when the wrench slipped and smashed my thumb he recalled a time his thumb was smashed ten times worse."

"He's an old man. You got to be diplomatic."

"Is that so?" Cloyd gave me his sidewise grin. "And how long has it been since you made him up a batch of gingerbread cookies?"

I felt these little hairs on the back of my neck come to attention.

"He *said* he liked them. They just wasn't as good as Mildred's, that's all."

"'Yeah, that be right,' " Cloyd imitated Skyler again. "'Mildred would go out after a full moon and get ginger and spend all the next day . . .'"

"Okay, I hear you. I did make them cookies from scratch, you know."

"Not if you used store-bought ginger. But that's a good girlie. You just keep giving her your best."

"I ain't never heard of ginger growing around here. Ginseng, maybe."

"Probably grew near the

Black Fork where he caught two trout and fed his family for a month."

"Well, I don't care. He ain't got nobody to see after his interests. I'm going to see him tomorrow."

When I drove up Skyler's lane the next morning, he was sitting on his front porch with his bum leg propped up on a couple of pillows.

"Hey, there, girlie!" He waved. "Who's that there with you? Is that Molly?"

Cloyd and I have four children. Molly's our oldest.

"No, this here's Ellie!" I hollered. "Molly's in eighth grade now!"

We always knew when Skyler hadn't heard us. He'd get this silly grin on his face and nod his head. That's what he was doing now.

"I brought you some vegetable soup for supper." I handed him the baby. "I'll just put this in the kitchen."

Skyler was talking to Ellie when I came back outside.

"This here watch was given me by my wife Mildred when we was first married. Now listen here." He turned the stem and the pocket watch chimed. Ellie's little hands jumped back from it, and then she giggled and grabbed for it. Skyler giggled, too.

"You'd best watch her." I

warned. "She gets her hands on that and you might see time fly!"

He didn't get it, but was anxious to show me his stitches.

"Forty-two," he announced. The cut went from his ankle to his knee. "Ain't never had so many at one time. Billy Pugh got cut in a bar fight during the war. He had to have near a hundred, I guess. Missed his eye by inches. 'Course he bit the other fella's ear off. Carried it around with him for luck. Down at the Legion we called him Billy Three Ears. He's gone now. Died back during the forties, polio. Had that ear buried right along with him. Mildred said he'd need three ears if St. Peter was to call the likes of him."

I'd heard this story before. It was my son's favorite. I knew Skyler was about to list all of the people in Gambles Mill that had died of polio.

"Skyler," I hollered, "I seen your ad in the paper. You had any calls on it?"

"Yeah, this old place has been good to me," he nodded and grinned. "But time has come to give it to younger folks. Had Pastor Spoke out here. He wants it for the new church. Mildred would like that, but thing is, he can't meet the other fella's price and a man's got to think about that. Young fella offered cash,

too. Said he wants to farm. I like that. Offered to buy all the equipment, too."

Knowing the condition of most of Skyler's farm machinery, this was a surprising bit of news.

"Who is he?" I yelled.

"Who?"

"The buyer you spoke to."

"Oh, Spoke? He's a tall fella, bald, likes to talk, he does. Puts me to mind of Pastor Mitchell who . . ."

"No! The other one! Who's the other buyer?"

"Oh, well, I ain't never seen him before. Bright young fella. Teacher, I think. Wants me out in a week. I'll be going out to the Pines, I guess. Seems a nice place. I visit Clarence Thatcher there regular. They got nice little apartments. Not like what you'd think of an *old* folks home, really . . ."

"I know," I said. "My cousin, Sara Jo Cooper, works there. She's a geriatric nurse."

"How's that?" He inclined his head.

"I say my cousin is a nurse there! You know, geriatric!"

"Don't believe I do. Knew a Jerry Adkins once. Dumb as a sackful of rocks. Couldn't pour water outta a boot if the directions was written on the heel . . ."

We were there for another hour. Or I should say we were there, but back in time fifty

years when the corn grew as tall as trees and Mildred did the work of three men and sang like an angel at church.

“Who ever heard of a teacher being able to pay cash for a farm?” I asked Cloyd that night at supper.

He shrugged. “These days who ever heard of anyone being able to pay cash for anything? Hey, did Skyler say anything about that old truck?”

Cloyd has been trying to get hold of an old Model A truck Skyler has had sitting in his barn since we moved here.

“No, he did say the teacher offered to buy all his equipment. Seems strange to me. Half of it ain't fit for more than a junkyard. Roy, eat that soup.”

My children don't like my homemade soup. Their bodies ain't attuned to all those nutrients.

The phone rang and Cloyd and I heaved a mutual sigh.

“Have whoever it is call back,” said Cloyd.

“If we had an answering machine . . .” began Molly, but stopped at her father's expression.

“Don't we have anything else to eat?” groaned Suzi.

“Eat.”

Suzi groaned again. She is

our resident Camille.

"Did old Skyler talk about Billy Pugh's ear?" asked Roy.

"Yes, he did, and don't call him old Skyler. It ain't respectful. Sounds like you're talking about a hound."

"How could Billy Pugh bite a man's whole ear off? Did he have a big mouth?"

"I don't know," I said. "He was dead afore I was born."

"He was?" Roy and Suzi said together in astonishment.

"Yes, he was!"

Cloyd chuckled. Molly cleared her throat.

"Well, Mother," she said in a slightly superior tone, "that would make it correct to call Skyler old, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so," I grumbled as the kids and Cloyd laughed. "Old Skyler it is."

"And windy!" laughed Roy. "Dad says old Skyler's windier than a popcorn fart!"

That night after a long talk with Roy about the appropriateness of certain language, I called my cousin Harry Butt. Harry's a real estate agent and could tell you the market value of just about any piece of property in a three county area. After that I called Stella McCall, who's secretary at Pastor Spoke's church.

"Well, that settles it." I joined Cloyd on the porch and flopped onto the swing. "Skyler is getting taken for sure."

"How's that?"

"This teacher or whatever has got something up his sleeve besides his arm. He's offered Skyler almost twice what Pastor Spoke did."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I called Harry and he told me the going price for Skyler's farm."

"How's old Harry doing?"

"Fine. Making money hand over fist with all these people moving into the area. Prices are high right now."

"How's Ophelia?"

"She's fine."

"And little Anita?"

"She's fine, too. Do you want to hear what I found out or not?"

"Sorry." He sat beside me on the swing and took my hand. "Okay, Nancy Drew, what's the deal?"

"Well, I found out from Stella McCall what Pastor Spoke offered Skyler. It was a fair price, too, from what Harry said. But Skyler said the other buyer offered quite a bit more. And offered to pay cash. Poor Skyler."

"Poor Skyler! Clara, you was so worried he'd be cheated and now you're worried because someone wants to pay him more than what the property's worth."

"I know it sounds stupid, but don't you find it peculiar? Maybe the money's counterfeit, or there's some precious minerals underneath the ground or

something. It just ain't right."

But right or not, Skyler did sell his farm to Stanley Spitler, the teacher who'd moved into the area from Washington, D.C.

Before Skyler left to move into the Pines, Cloyd got up enough courage to ask him straight out if he'd sell the Model A. When Skyler finally figured out what he wanted, he was surprised anyone would want that old car. "You go right ahead there, boy," he told Cloyd. "See what you can do with her." He refused to let us pay him anything, too. "I got more money than I'll ever need," he said.

He seemed to fit right in at the Pines. Besides his old pal Clarence Thatcher, he had himself a sort of a girlfriend named Bernice. She was a soft-spoken lady, and about the third time I visited Skyler she cooked lunch for us. Skyler was full of praises about it. He never mentioned Mildred once, which, though Bernice had no way of knowing it, was a very high compliment. One thing she'd talked him into in her quiet way was a hearing aid. (First time I said howdy to him after he got it I near knocked him outta his chair.)

"Bernice does tole painting and likes to garden. She told me if I can find one of them old milk cans she'll paint it for me."

Cloyd was working overtime, and I'd met him for dinner at the airport where he works.

"So then," I continued, "Skyler said there was about four of those cans in the loft of the barn. I figure we could take the truck over there tonight and get them. You gonna be done by eight?"

Cloyd had quit-eating and was grinning at me like the cat that ate the canary.

"I see," he said.

"You see what?" I bristled.

"Just that now you'll get to meet our mysterious and rich neighbor."

"Well, *yeah* . . . he really is mysterious, you know. He don't teach anywhere around here. I checked."

"You still think there's something going on, don't you?" Cloyd just shook his head in resignation and commenced to eat.

I looked at my husband and for a second felt sorry for him. He really does have to put up with a lot from me. There have been lots of times my overactive imagination has sparked something that I've held onto and gnawed like a dog on a bone. Most times it's harmless, like an idea for a story when he's found me writing at the kitchen table with stacks of unwashed dishes surrounding me and piles of unwashed laundry in the hall. He don't complain much about it. He and the kids just go about their business, and if they have to ask me something they've even learned to identify

an affirmative grunt from a negative one. But there have been times when my suspicious and nosy nature has led me into adventures I ain't bargained for and it's them times Cloyd has had to enter in and protect me from myself. This was shaping up to be one of them times. Poor man.

"What you looking at? I got mayonnaise in my beard or something?" He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth.

"No," I said, still looking.

Cloyd looked over both shoulders and back at me. "What in the world you thinking about, Clara?"

"How's work going?"

"Fine. Had to fix the ADI on Kevin North's Aztec and then install an ELT on the company's Cherokee . . ."

(You want a real mystery? Try talking English to an aircraft mechanic.)

"Cloyd, we really don't have to go over there . . ."

"Oh yes we do," he nodded. "We'll go over there and you can put to rest all your wild ideas and then you won't be looking at me with that dopy expression."

Me and my dopy expression went home.

Late that evening Cloyd and I were about halfway down Skyler's lane when a man came busting out the door and stood

waiting for us on the front lawn.

"He don't look happy," said Cloyd as we pulled up and parked the truck.

I grasped the box of gingerbread cookies on my lap and fixed a smile on my face.

"Hi there, neighbor!"

The man in the yard was a big burly fellow with huge, beefy hands fixed on his substantial hips. He did not look at all neighborly.

"I'm Clara Cates and this here's my husband Cloyd."

"What do you want?"

"Well . . . here." I handed him the box. "Here's some gingerbread cookies, Mr. Spitler."

"I'm not Mr. Spitler. Mr. Spitler's inside working on his novel."

"His novel! Ain't that something! I write, too . . ."

"What do you want?"

"Hey, buddy," Cloyd said, "there ain't no need to . . ."

"We came here for privacy." He jabbed his finger at Cloyd. "Understand?"

I grabbed Cloyd's arm, which was hard as a rock due to the fact his fist was clenched.

"Listen, mister," I said. "Skyler Funk asked us to come by and get some milk cans from the barn, that's all. Now we'll just get them and be on our way, all right?"

"No, it's not all right. Funk

sold the farm. It's Mr. Spitler's property now and I want you off it."

Next time I bring cookies to neighbors I'm going to bring two boxes and the nasty folks are going to get the batch laced with Ex-Lax.

Cloyd was still fuming when we went to bed.

"I'm sorry, honey. You didn't want to go in the first place."

"You know what? I'm glad we did. I think you're right, Clara. There is something going on over there."

When Skyler heard the news, he near hit the roof.

"I didn't sell that boy no milk cans! I'm going over there and teach him some manners."

"Skyler, the guy that met us looked mean as a snake. It ain't that big a deal, is it, Bernice?"

"No." Bernice patted his arm. "We can get . . ."

"What's he going to use them for anyway," Skyler boomed. "Spite, that's what it is! Puts me to mind of Ernest Polk when they was going to reposess his pigs. 'Fore they come to get 'em, he poisoned the lot. Them was the biggest, finest mess of pork I ever seen, too. I should've sold the place to the pastor. Would have, I think, if that boy hadn't showed me that case full of

money." He hobbled over to a closet and took out a briefcase. "Look here."

We both gasped as Skyler opened the case, which was indeed filled with money.

"Skyler!" Bernice, the quiet soft-spoken lady, screamed. "What in the world you doing with that money? You go put that in a bank right now."

"Bank!" Skyler slammed the lid shut. "I ain't been to no bank since 1931."

I sat down, light in the head from seeing all that money and sensing all the little corners of avarice in my soul it inspired.

"Skyler." I interrupted his tirade against the financial institutions in this country. "Would you go with me to see Jerry Bridger?"

"That boy ain't half the sheriff his granddaddy was."

"True or not, I think there's something fishy going on over at your farm."

Bernice and I finally got him and his money in the car and over to the sheriff's.

Jerry Bridger III followed his father and grandfather into law enforcement, and many's the time I've worn his patience thin with suspicions and questions. After we told him Skyler's story and showed him the money, he sat for a couple of minutes working a toothpick in his mouth.

"Well," he said finally, "there's two things I can tell you folks. First, the man's right as far as any of you going on that property. You sold the farm, Skyler. You go over there now, it's trespassing."

"I lived on that farm for over sixty years," Skyler sputtered.

Jerry held up his hand. "True enough. But this here money says it's not yours any longer. It ain't only illegal, it's dangerous from what Clara tells me about this man who met them. Clara, you say this fella came out when you was just halfway down the lane?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Just interesting. Now, the second thing I'll tell you is this. From what you've said, I got some very definite suspicions of my own. Skyler, I'd like to hold onto this case and the money. I'll write you a check for living expenses for the next couple of weeks and give you a receipt for the money."

Skyler wasn't having any of this until Jerry told him they would dust the case and the money for fingerprints and run any they found through their known-felon file. "I doubt Mr. Spitler expected you to keep this amount of cash in a closet at your apartment," he pointed out.

When we got back into the car, Skyler was still not satis-

fied. "That boy's granddad would've gone out there with twenty men, guns blazing. Teach them boys the way things are in Gambles Mill."

Since Skyler had given Cloyd the Model A, I hadn't seen much of him. That night I went out to the garage and watched him work. He had the Model A almost ready to paint.

"She's gonna be a beauty, Clara. We ought to enter her in the Fourth of July parade."

"How do you know it's a she? Why is it ships and cars and planes are always female?"

"Don't forget hurricanes."

"Not any more. Now we got male hurricanes, too."

"Hmph. Should be called himmicanes. Look at her. More metal in one door than we got in our whole car. Didn't really take much body work."

"Well, now. You always been a good one for body work, ain't you?"

This, as intended, got his attention.

"Guess so," he grinned and started toward me.

It was then we heard a howling sound and the kids commenced to holler.

We hurried out of the garage and found the kids surrounding our dog, Disney, on the front porch.

"She's been shot!" Molly howled almost as loud as the

dog. Suzi and little Roy were crying as Disney lay on her belly with her head up and back and an unearthly, mournful sound coming from her throat.

She'd been buckshot in the rear end (which was serious indeed as she's already brain-damaged).

"We best get her to the vet," Cloyd said, hugging each kid in turn. "It's all right. We'll just get her taken care of."

"It's my fault! It's my fault!" Suzi cried. "I was the one who let her out. I done killed Disney!"

"You ain't killed Disney!" I scrubbed my hand up and down her back.

Disney's tail looked pretty ragged, and the back of her legs and her rump was scattered with small areas of matted, sticky hair and blood.

"Now, who would do such a thing?" I said angrily, but almost before the words was out of my mouth Cloyd and I looked at each other and we knew. Many's the time Disney would go over and visit Skyler. Skyler even kept a box of biscuits for her. We didn't say a word but we knew.

"I'll get a towel," I said, stomping into the house.

Cloyd got her all wrapped up and into the car. He allowed the three oldest kids to go along. I got Ellie and we waved goodbye

as they drove down the lane.

Ellie looked at me with wide, somber eyes.

"Woof o dibydoonum," she commented.

"You said a mouthful, darlin'."

I was getting madder by the minute. It wouldn't do to go storming over there, as Jerry Bridger had warned me off and as I had no desire to suffer Disney's fate. But Jerry hadn't said I couldn't try to find something out from my own back yard, had he?

I set up Ellie's swing under the maple tree, and put her in it, and cranked it up. Then I marched into the house and got the telescope we'd bought the year Halley's comet passed over. With some difficulty I got it up into Roy's treehouse and trained it on Skyler's farm.

At first all I saw was Skyler's farm like I knew it. The new owner had only been there a month or so, but there hadn't been any improvements made at the house, and the orchards, if anything, looked more run-down than ever.

Then I saw a mover's van coming slowly up Skyler's lane. I lost it as it came around a curve and then trained the telescope back to the yard. There were about seven guys now over by the cellar door. The van moved real slow, then stopped

by the group of men. The door was opened and a ramp set up and they began to unload large drums of what looked like some sort of industrial chemicals or something. The only thing I could really make out was the word "flammable" in large red letters. Several things went through my head, primarily toxic waste and germ warfare. This of course sparked other thoughts of Nazis, nuclear war, and mad scientists. I gotta stop watching late night TV. The van was unloaded in a matter of minutes and the men went inside the house.

I trained the telescope on the house. Most of the windows had the shades drawn and there was no sign of activity until I got to the attic window and saw something move.

I near fell out of the tree. In the attic window was a telescope twice the size I had. It had moved from looking toward the lane and was pointed right at me.

I froze there and waited, too scared to move. The more I tried to remain still the more aware I became of my own body. There was a maddening itch on the bottom of my foot, my legs cramped, a couple of gnats came buzzing around my face and tried to take up residence in my nostrils, and I had to go to the bathroom. Ellie was fussing in

her swing that had cranked down.

It seemed an eternity, but finally the other telescope blinked and moved slowly back toward the lane. I backed slowly out of the treehouse, scrambled down the ladder, grabbed Ellie, and scuttled into the house.

"You stay away from even thinking about them people," Cloyd ordered after I told him what I'd done.

Jerry Bridger said much the same thing when I called him the next day with my information.

"Clara, I'll tell you this much. We suspect there is something going on and we got it under investigation. Don't be doing anything to get yourself hurt or mess us up, hear?"

"Yeah, I hear. You know they had to amputate Disney's tail. She's got this little bandaged stump now. Every time Suzi looks at her, she busts into tears."

I thought I heard some chuckling on the other side of the line. Sheriff Bridger does have a warped sense of humor.

Another week passed and the only activity I noticed over near Skyler's was some badly needed road work.

"Bout time," said Cloyd. "It woulda been nice if they'd done it afore them potholes wrecked the shocks in my car."

Cloyd and I had made a decision not to tell Skyler about what happened to Disney. Unfortunately we forgot to tell the kids, and one afternoon when Skyler and Bernice stopped out, they got the whole sordid story from Roy. Bernice had to hide her car keys from Skyler to keep him from charging right over there.

Cloyd finished the Model A, and that weekend we took it out to the Pines to show Skyler.

"That is one piece of work, son!" Skyler patted Cloyd's shoulder. "She looks better than the day I bought her, that's a fact."

Cloyd near swallowed his pipe. All the way over he was sure Skyler would know of someone back in '34 who'd taken an axle and a fender and built a Rolls Royce from it.

Later, after Skyler and Bernice had taken a spin, Skyler asked me when I was going to bake him up a batch of those delicious gingerbread cookies.

"Must be Bernice," said Cloyd on the way home.

"Bless her heart," I said. "Seeing the two of them together makes me almost look forward to getting old. Did you see how she's got that old boy trained and never raised her voice? You gonna be like that?"

"I'm like that *now*. When I get old, I intend to be cantan-

kerous and sloppy. If that don't work, when you start ordering me around, I'll just turn off my hearing aid."

"Well, that hearing aid . . . and Bernice . . . has done wonders for Skyler. He's just like a big old pussycat now."

"Yeah, and now he don't seem to be so crazy mad about his farm."

"I think he's forgotten about it," I nodded.

We couldn't have been more wrong. Skyler had just been biding his time and making his plans.

It was about three days later. Cloyd was at work, Roy and Suzi had gone to the pool, and Molly was on the phone. I'd just put Ellie down for her nap when I heard the car.

I knew right away it was the Model A and got downstairs and out on the porch just in time to see it headed down our lane with Skyler at the wheel.

"Molly!" I ran into our bedroom where she was sprawled out on our bed with the phone, a bag of chips, and a bowl of half-rubberized jello. "Did you talk to Skyler?"

"Just a minute," she said into the mouthpiece. "Skyler? No. Is he here?"

"He just took the Model A."

"He did? Why?"

"I don't know! Get off the phone. I got to call your dad."

As soon as Molly hung up, the phone jangled.

It was Bernice. "Clara, has Skyler been there?" Her voice sounded upset.

"He just took the Model A! Did he tell you anything?"

"Oh, Clara, I'm scared. He gave me all these papers to hold for him last night. His will and the receipt for the money and some savings bonds. He said he wanted me to put them in my safe here. But then this morning I saw him getting into a cab. Clara, he had his shotgun."

"Call Jerry Bridger," I ordered. "That fool is going in with guns blazing."

I hung up the phone. "Molly, call Dad. Tell him what's happened."

"This wouldn't have happened if we had call waiting, you . . ."

I was already halfway down the steps. "I'm going after Skyler and try to stop him afore he gets to the farm."

As I ran out of the house I was stopped by the thought that Skyler, for all his talk, was not a dumb man. I clambered up the ladder to the treehouse and searched for the Model A through the telescope. I could see Skyler had left the main road and was taking a back way in through the apple orchard.

I drove faster than I had ever driven before, but by the time

I got to where the Model A was parked, Skyler was hiking through the trees toward the back of the house. I ran after him and hollered. He disappeared into a copse of trees behind the house.

When I got there, everything was quiet and Skyler was nowhere to be seen. I was too close to the house to holler now and crept as quiet as I could toward the cellar door.

There was no one in the yard and no sound from the house. It was a peculiar feeling. Here I was at Skyler's familiar old farmhouse; it was a warm and sunny day; and I felt chilled to the bone.

I sidled up under the kitchen window and peeked inside. The shade was drawn, but there was space between it and the sill, so I was able to see inside.

Skyler's kitchen had several long tables with huge cookie sheets on them. In the corner there was a guy smoking a cigarette. On the counter were a couple of double bar scales and bags of what looked to be milky white rocks. My box of gingerbread cookies was there, too, tossed carelessly on top of the refrigerator. In the corner was a shotgun and, if I could believe my eyes, a machine gun. The guy in the corner jumped up suddenly. I ducked down. The front door slammed. My foot

was commencing to itch again and I definitely had to go to the bathroom.

"It's them road guys again," said a voice from the porch.

Another voice cursed. "I'll get me a jug of water."

Then a shotgun blast ripped through the air over by the copse of trees and there was a lot of yelling and confusion. I was stuck between the men on the porch and whatever was in the woods, so I did the only thing I could think to do. I yanked the cellar door open and practically fell down the steps. I just had time to see that the barrels I'd seen them unload contained acetone. It all clicked together very fast then.

"Hey, you!" a man's voice hollered from the top of the steps. "Come out of there."

I tore up the steps to the kitchen. Beside the box of cookies I saw a knife. I grabbed both of them and turned to face my pursuer, commencing to say my prayers.

"Give it up," said the voice from the top of the basement steps. "Police."

"Police? Honest?" The knife clattered to the floor.

Outside, Officer Marty Argiro handed me over to Sheriff Jerry Bridger.

"Book her," he grinned. "Possession of gingerbread cookies."

I found Skyler over by the

truck we'd thought belonged to a road crew talking to a man we'd thought was a road worker.

"Hey there, girlie! We done bust us an opium ring!"

"I'd like to bust your head!"

"Actually it was a cocaine laboratory..." began the undercover man.

But I was hollering at Skyler like I'd never hollered at him before. "I could shake you ... you ... you could've been killed!"

His eyes opened wide. "Why, Clara, I'm sorry if this has been a bit hard on you, but I got one of them boys in the woods. He was after you, too. Heard you holler and came running. I hid myself in the deer blind and kept making enough noise to keep him away from you and after me. Then, after you was safe in the yard, I took aim at his big ol' lard butt and let her rip. Yessir!" Skyler giggled and slapped his leg. "That ol' boy gave me some big target all right."

I just stared at him, realizing I was in the position of thanking him for saving my life from a situation he'd put me into to begin with. (Now I know how Cloyd feels.)

Cloyd came running up then. I don't know which of us he'd liked to have smacked first. He kept turning from me to Skyler with his mouth working and no

words coming out. I gave him a hug.

Later that night Jerry Bridger came over for some coffee and conversation.

The cocaine laboratory had been capable of producing five hundred pounds every eight hours. The seventy pounds they'd confiscated had a street value of twenty million dollars.

"And all because of a couple of milk cans," I mused.

"It just goes to show you," said Jerry, "it pays to be neighborly. If you and Skyler hadn't started flapping your jaws, it might have operated for months. But learning Skyler had been overpaid, and in cash yet, got me suspicious. We checked the electric bill and found they was using near ten times more than Skyler ever did. And the fingerprints on the money led us to a couple of fellas with drug arrests, so I called the task force. Besides the telescope, they had a laser beam across the lane at the curve. This was no penny ante operation. You could've been killed, Clara, that's a fact."

"What I can't believe is a guy

traveling with all that acetone and ether," said Cloyd. "Can you imagine the explosion if he'd had an accident?"

"Like thousands of sticks of dynamite," nodded Jerry. "I tell you, this job is getting worse all the time."

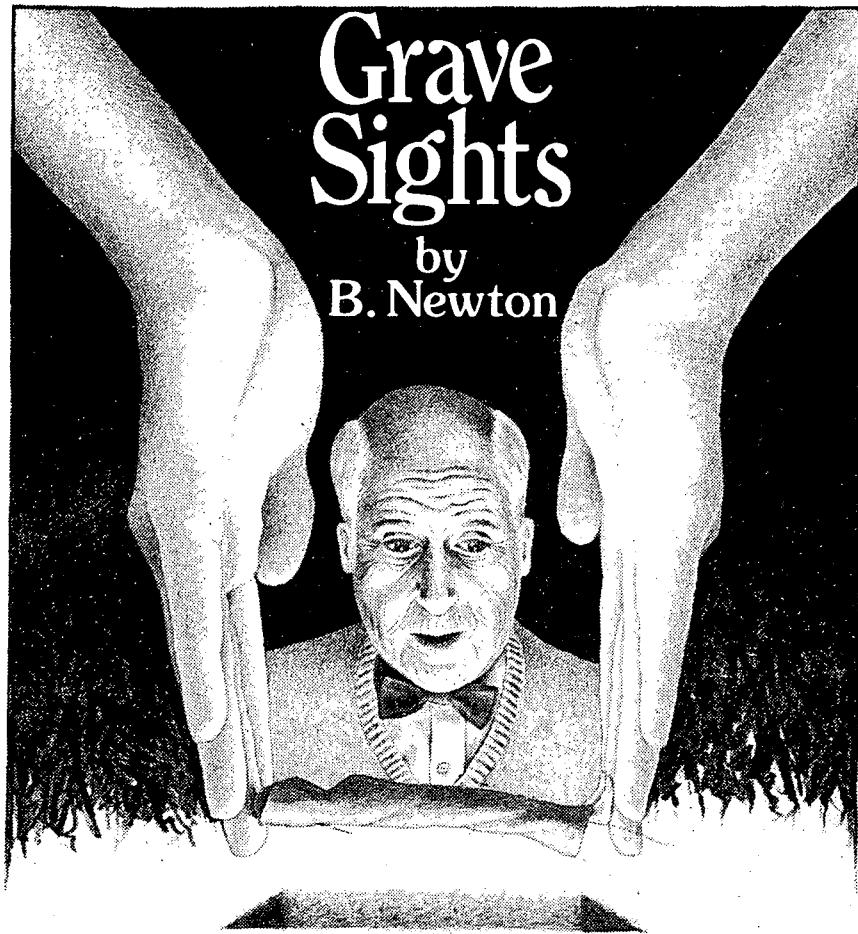
I felt weak again and leaned against Cloyd. "With all them weapons and explosives, it's a wonder no one *was* killed," I whispered.

"With all that cocaine," said Cloyd, holding me close, "somebody probably was, somewhere."

Skyler was not charged with shooting Lard Butt because they decided he did it to protect me. He and Bernice were married August the eleventh in the apple orchard. Pastor Spoke, who was in process of buying the farm from the government, performed the ceremony. Afterwards, Cloyd took the newlyweds driving around town in the Model A with shoes and cans clattering behind them. Disney sat on the seat beside Cloyd with her ears flapping in the wind, her tongue hanging out, and her stump wagging to beat the band.

Grave Sights

by
B. Newton



The boy looked like his son, not much but enough. It reminded him he had a son. Some son, he thought, some goddamn son. It was then he noticed the women . . .

"Boy," he called, "what are those women doin' on that roof?"

"Where, Mr. Boatright?" asked Louie, coming towards the old man.

"Why, right there, right there." Bentley Boatright pointed to-

wards the building's roof, his finger trembling. "Goddamn, there must be forty or fifty of them up there. Looks like they're hammerin'. Are they fixin' that roof? Reshinglin' or somethin' like that?"

"I don't see anyone, Mr. Boatright."

Bentley Boatright leaned towards Louie. "What?"

"I said I don't see any women on the roof."

"Huh. Ya can't? Well, they're there, all right. Right there. Can't you see them? They're all over the place. Must be fifty to a hundred of 'em, poundin' away like hell up there. See 'em?"

"Sorry, Mr. Boatright," said Louie. He spread a blanket over the old man's lap, tucked it in under his legs.

"Wonder where they're gettin all those nails," said Bentley Boatright. He put a trembling, thin hand to his ear and tugged on its lobe.

"Mr. Boatright," said Louie. "—Mr. Boatright."

Bentley Boatright turned. "Unnh, uh," he said.

"Mr. Boatright, I've got to go check on your medicine and lunch, so why don't you sit out here in the sun for a while, okay?"

"All right," said Bentley Boatright. "What's your name?"

"Louie," said Louie in the same patient voice in which he had answered the same question fifteen minutes earlier.

"You live around here? Who's your daddy? My farm's just right over there; maybe I know him."

"I work here, Mr. Boatright, and I doubt if you know my father. Now I've got to see about lunch. You sit out here, I'll be back in a minute."

"All right," said Bentley Boatright. "You new here, Louie?"

"No, Mr. Boatright, I'm not new. I've been here two years, remember?"

"Two years! Well, whaddaya know. Two whole years?"

"Yes, Mr. Boatright, two whole years." Louie moved Bentley Boatright's walker to the side of the bench. "Don't wander off anywhere, Mr. Boatright," he said.

"Oh, no, no, I won't." He looked back to the roof. "Good God," he said, "they're dancing now." They absorbed him, the fifty to a hundred women dancing on the rest home's roof, and Louie was allowed to slip away up the soft hill of closely-clipped green grass to the brick house, his white uniform pure and stainless, reflecting in the hot sunlight like flashes of thought.

Thomas lifted her blanket-wrapped body from the trunk. She

was not too heavy, but he was sweating anyway. The sun came down hot through the trees; the air was still; gnats swarmed around his head, and he shook it to drive them away, but they always returned. His black T-shirt was soaked and untucked, the zipper of his Levi's partly open: but he was not vulnerable. He struggled and turned and slammed the trunk closed with his elbow without setting the body down.

Okay, he thought, good. Okay. Everything's going good. I'll come back for the shovel after I find a place, no, wait, that's stupid. It'll just waste time. I'd better take it with me.

Thomas took the shovel from the back seat's floor.

Okay, he thought. Now.

Dancing, twirling, spinning: they leaped from their toes and pirouetted, waltzed in pairs and tapped alone. The roof had become a ballroom of rushing, swirling color. One of them looked like Ivy, and Bentley Boatright called to her—"Ivy!"

The fifty dancers on the roof vanished without even so much as the flick of a tutu. There seemed to be a sudden silence, though there had been no more noise before.

Bentley Boatright sat back on the bench, staring at the folded hands in his lap. Why, he remembered buying *his* nails at Henderson's Hardware, good nails, too, good price. Henderson, Henderson . . . he couldn't remember Henderson, but the nails were six cents a pound, he remembered that.

Maybe that was where those women got their nails. Could be, he thought. Could be. Bentley Boatright looked up to tell the boy that the women probably bought their nails at Henderson's Hardware, but the boy wasn't around. Where was he?

"Hey, boy!" Bentley Boatright called. "Boy!" But his hoarse voice did not carry far and no one came.

The sun came down hot on him through the leaves of the maple beside the bench. With a trembling hand he reached into his back pocket and took out his white handkerchief. He unfolded the handkerchief and wiped his forehead, examined it, and ran it across his forehead again. He began deliberately folding the cloth into halves. Sure hot in this field, he thought. I should go check on that mare, see to it she's got plenty a water. Bentley Boatright looked across the lawn, seeing furrowed field, beyond the road where he saw no road, to the woods' treeline. His house was just a quick walk through those trees . . . he could check on that mare and see if Ivy had anything cold to drink, and maybe when he got back to tilling

this field some of the heat would have lifted. That wasn't a bad idea at all, no siree, he thought.

Thomas moved through the trees. The girl's body and the shovel were tossed over his shoulder. The heat was unbearable; sweat trickled down the side of his face, streamed down the middle of his back, pebbled on his upper lip, made his scalp itch. He felt he was melting. He breathed heavily, the hot air searing his throat, drying his mouth.

God, a beer would be good, he thought.

Prickles and thistles clung to his pants and shirt, snagged the blanket he had wrapped the body in, hindering him, trying to hold him back. Often he had to twist and struggle, cursing, to yank the body free of a strong branch or thorny bush that had caught the blanket and would not let go. Twigs and leaves scratched his face, sweat seeping into their tracks, stinging like bug bites. He stopped once to wipe his face with his sticky T-shirt, then moved deeper into the trees, searching for a small hidden clearing, hoping to find a good place for the grave.

Yep, it was a good idea, Bentley Boatright decided.

He worked slowly to his feet; steadying himself with his hands on the bench, he took small shaky steps towards his walker. He thought: I'll take the plow back with me and see if maybe I can't bang out that twisted blade, goddammit. Second time this week I hit a buried rock; if it's not one thing, it's another.

With a soft clatter and rattle, he gripped the walker, pausing for a rest. Lord! it was hot. Good way to get heat stroke, he thought. He touched his head—where's my hat? Ivy let him walk off this morning without his hat; that woman. Well, he'd remember to pick it up before he returned to the fields, it was too hot to be without a hat.

Bentley Boatright placed the walker a foot in front of him, and stepped. Moved it ahead again, and stepped. Advanced the walker, and stepped. When he came out from the shade of the maple, the sun hit him with all its heat, and immediately sweat beaded on his forehead, his upper lip; through his thin white hair his pink scalp gleamed with perspiration.

But Bentley Boatright was determined. He continued across the lawn, down the easy slope to the road, and to the woods beyond.

He'd just cut through there and be at the house. "Hope it ain't

this hot in the woods," he mumbled, his head down, keeping an eye on his placement of the walker. He thought: should be cooler in the woods.

Thomas stepped out of bushes into a small clearing where the sun was not shielded and came down straight and hot. It was a good place. Good enough, anyway, he thought, I'm tired. He set the blanketed body down, rolling his shoulder afterwards to loosen the muscles.

The ground was soft where he drove the shovel's blade; *Thomas* pulled off his shirt, his skin oily with sweat, and began digging. His back muscles heaved as he tossed dirt to the side; he hacked at roots that jutted across the hole and broke fist-sized rocks from the hole's walls. He shoveled quickly—he wanted to be done with it, done with all the dirt and heat and sweat of it.

Two feet down, the soil became rocky, the work slower. He thought, if I curl her up, I won't have to make it that long. And he decided four feet would be deep enough—it didn't have to be a real grave. This wasn't a cemetery. Four feet was plenty.

Bentley Boatright crossed the road, stopped at its edge to rest. He pulled his handkerchief out and wiped his face. Whew! he thought, *hot*.

As he moved down into the ditch, almost stumbling, and then up the other side and into the woods, he thought very little. His concentration was taken up with placing the walker, struggling through low, tangled brush, catching himself from falling. There was no path. It was a slow, cautious hike, but steady and determined. Indeed, *Bentley Boatright* forgot everything—the mare and her water, *Ivy* and her cold drink, the women dancing on the home's roof, his goddamn son—and thought only of his next step, maybe of the next two, but that was all. He would continue walking through the woods as long as the woods continued to be before him, and not even consider where he was going or when he would get there. Now and then when he stopped to rest and wipe his face, he would remember he didn't have his hat and then he would remember *Ivy*: "Goddamn woman, letting me go without my hat."

Tentatively, *Bentley Boatright* gave his weight to the walker and stepped forward. *Ivy* and his missing hat slipped from his mind again, covered by a grey mist of merged images, past and forgotten . . . for a time. He crossed under a copse of pines, the ground

covered with their needles. Over this ground his steps became silent, only the occasional metallic clank of his walker announced his presence and efforts.

Thomas, soaked in sun and dirt and hot, tossed the shovel to the side of the hole he had dug. He squatted, wiped his red face with his T-shirt. He'd take a short break before dumping it in the ground. Jesus! it was hot.

(There was no feeling of guilt for what he had done. It was just a thing he had done. He had shot squirrels, birds, rabbits; he had dropped goldfish to the floor and watched them flip to death; he had stepped on ants, swatted flies, squished beetles. There had been no guilt then, and it was all the same now.)

A slow rising to his feet as he decided to hurry up and finish. He kicked the shovel aside and moved towards the body; a foot was uncovered, he tossed the corner of the blue blanket over it before grasping its ankles and hauling it to the hole, taking short, shuffling steps backwards through the grass.

Bentley Boatright crossed under the pines, moving towards the brambles and bushes through which he would pass simply because they were in his path. Just before entering them, however, he looked up to study how he would take them—high and thick and thorny as they were—and he saw through a tunnel in the branches and leaves the clearing, the sun coming down hot upon it, blinding it, burning it. And he saw *Thomas* heft the blanketed body into the hole, heard his grunt, watched him look around, then stoop for his shovel.

"What's he doing on my land?" *Bentley Boatright* mumbled. He almost hollered, Hey! what're you doing on my land, fellah! Just what d'you think you're doin'? But he didn't. He didn't because as he took a deep breath for the holler, it hit him what *Thomas* was doing; then it hit him what *Thomas* had done.

"Good Lord," *Bentley Boatright* said softly. "Oh good Lord." He thought: I've got to tell someone, I've got to tell someone, I've got to tell someone.

Who?

He didn't care. He turned the walker around and hurried back across beneath the pines. He was sweating now, but he didn't pause to wipe his face; he hurried through the bushes, stumbling, knocking his walker into saplings and trunks, slapping branches, struggling over fallen rotting trees.

"Horrible," he mumbled. "Horrible. Got to tell somebody."

He didn't know where he was going, he'd forgotten where he had come from.

Thomas froze. The noises had come from farther back in the woods, somewhere beyond the bushes; was it someone? Slowly, quietly, he lowered the shovel to the ground, slowly and quietly moving towards the bushes, eyes darting, hands tensed, open at his sides.

If it was somebody, and they saw him, he would have to kill them, too. It was something he would simply have to do.

The sun streamed down on him, pooling shadows beneath his searching eyes, his eyes that scrutinized the shadows in the bushes. *Thomas* listened. He stopped breathing, just stood there before the bushes, looking into them, scanning them, trying to delve into them—and sweating.

He saw nothing. He heard nothing strange. After several minutes he returned to the hole and finished shoveling dirt over the body. When the grave was level again with the ground, *Thomas* carefully placed squares of sod and grass on its top and tamped them down.

He was done. He stepped back to look it over, decided it looked okay if no one looked too closely—he knew no one would—and he turned away from the buried body and left the brilliantly hot clearing. He still did not think of it as a grave plot or a cemetery or a burial ground; it was just a clearing, a small clearing he never wanted to sweat in again.

Hurrying, almost out of the woods, *Bentley Boatright* let out a shout of alarm as he pitched into the ditch alongside the road, twisting his legs in the walker, striking his head on the ground. "Uoof," and his eyes closed.

Black and white. Milling motion. The farm, the well. Weight on it all. To the well. Hair tickling his cheek. Rain but dryness . . . to the dry well. Falling, dropping, darkness, release of heaviness but weight still weighing. And then sound: a thumping, smacking, crumpling, a soft splash up through darkness.

"*Hunh!*" *Bentley Boatright* jerked open his eyes. It was still there, all there right before him. He shook, trembled, squeezed his eyes shut.

Hands touched him.

He pulled away. "No," he said.

"Mr. Boatright?"

Another voice, this one from higher up, out of the ditch: "Is he all right? Is his hip broken? Oh man, if his hip's broken we're in it deep, man. I mean *deep*."

"Mr. Boatright, are you all right?" The hands moved over him, cautiously examining, pressing, turning. "Mr. Boatright?"

Then it was gone, the memory, the images, all of it gone. He ceased trembling. He opened his eyes. "Yes?" he said to the young man dressed in white who was kneeling beside him in the grasses and dirt of the ditch.

"Are you all right? You've fallen into the ditch. How does your hip feel? Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, fine," said Bentley Boatright. "Fine. Would you mind helping me up here? I seem to have fallen into a ditch or some such thing."

Louie eased his hands under Mr. Boatright's arms. "Are you sure your hip's all right, Mr. Boatright? Does it hurt at all?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Hip doesn't hurt a bit. Just give me a hand, there. There, that's . . ." Bentley Boatright gripped Louie's forearm. "My God, the body," he said. "I almost forgot. Good God, that poor woman. Oh my."

"What woman, Mr. Boatright? Where?" asked Louie.

"Back there, back there." Bentley Boatright waved into the trees.

"Back in the well. I saw her."

"Man, there ain't no well back there," said the aide up on the road. "He's seeing things. Come on, get him up here. We got enough trouble already, man, come on."

Like fragile cargo, Louie began passing Bentley Boatright up out of the ditch, kicking the walker out of their way.

"No." Bentley Boatright twisted around towards the woods. "No. I saw her. I saw him put her in the well. She . . . she was beautiful. But there was blood in her hair and it was sticky and her cheek was bruised where he hit her. And—"

"What's he talking about?" asked the aide on the road. "Is he crazy or what?"

"Something," said Louie. "He was seeing women on the roof earlier. Isn't that right, Mr. Boatright? Remember the women on the roof that were hammering nails and fixing the roof? Remember the women?"

"No," said Bentley Boatright, shaking his head. "I'm not, I, I . . . I *saw* her, I tell you. I saw her. He knocked that letter right out of her hand when he hit her, slapped her with his open hand, knocked her down. And then he just went crazy and kept right on hitting her. I'm telling you, I *saw* it. Hitting her, and hitting her, and hitting her. And she was screaming . . . yes, I remember now, she was screaming, she was screaming—

"Oh God no."

Bentley Boatright stopped moving and stared into the woods. "She was screaming," he whispered, "Bentley, don't. Please stop. Bentley, don't hurt me.' . . . Ivy." He moaned, passed a hand across his face, hid his eyes.

"Is he all right? Who's Ivy?"

"His wife, I guess," said Louie.

"Oh, Ivy, I'm sorry." He cried into his hands. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . . God help me, I didn't mean to. Dear God, forgive me. Forgive me. Ivy, *Ivy*, forgive me." The memory'd returned.

Sprawled on the floor, he straddles her. Her head whips from left to right and back as he strikes her; she is screaming, sobbing, her hands claw at his eyes; she kicks and thrashes and screams—Bentley, please don't! Her face crushes under his fist.

Now: Deep,

Deep,

Deep within him there was a pain, a crushing fist that never stopped beating his heart; doing what he could not have imagined created unimaginable weight, more than regret or remorse, more than guilt . . . it was, it was unimaginable, this pain. He could not live with it. How could he live with it?

How? My God! how! he thought. How?

Louie and the other aide carried the sobbing Bentley Boatright across the road, up the slight hill, and eased him, one on each side, onto the same bench where he had been sitting.

"I'll go back for the walker," said the other aide. "You keep an eye on this nut."

"All right," said Louie.

The aide jogged off.

Louie squatted in front of Bentley Boatright, his hands on Bentley's knees. "Are you all right, Mr. Boatright?"

But Bentley Boatright was looking far off into the trees across the road. There was a well back there somewhere. He was mumbling, tears lined down his soft, wrinkled face. "Ivy," he whispered.

"Mr. Boatright?"

—It was gone. Snap! gone.

"Hmmm?" Bentley Boatright turned to Louie. He had stopped crying; the fist in his chest had unclenched.

"I said, are you all right?"

"Oh, fine, fine." Bentley Boatright mashed his lips together, working up spit to wet his mouth that had for some reason suddenly gone dry. "What's your name?"

"Louie," said Louie.

"Louie, eh," repeated Bentley Boatright. "Louie. Louie. Louie. Nope, never knew a Louie. You live around here? Maybe I know your family. That's my farm right over there," pointing into the woods.

"That's nice," said Louie.

"Had a son 'bout your age," said Bentley Boatright.

"Is that right?" Louie waved at the aide coming across the road with the walker. "He's okay," he hollered to him. The aide waved back: "good," it signaled.

"Yep, married a colored girl, though, and never saw him again. Met her at that goddamned college, that's what. I told him I'd have nothin' to do with him, too, but he married her anyway. I told him."

"Huh," said Louie.

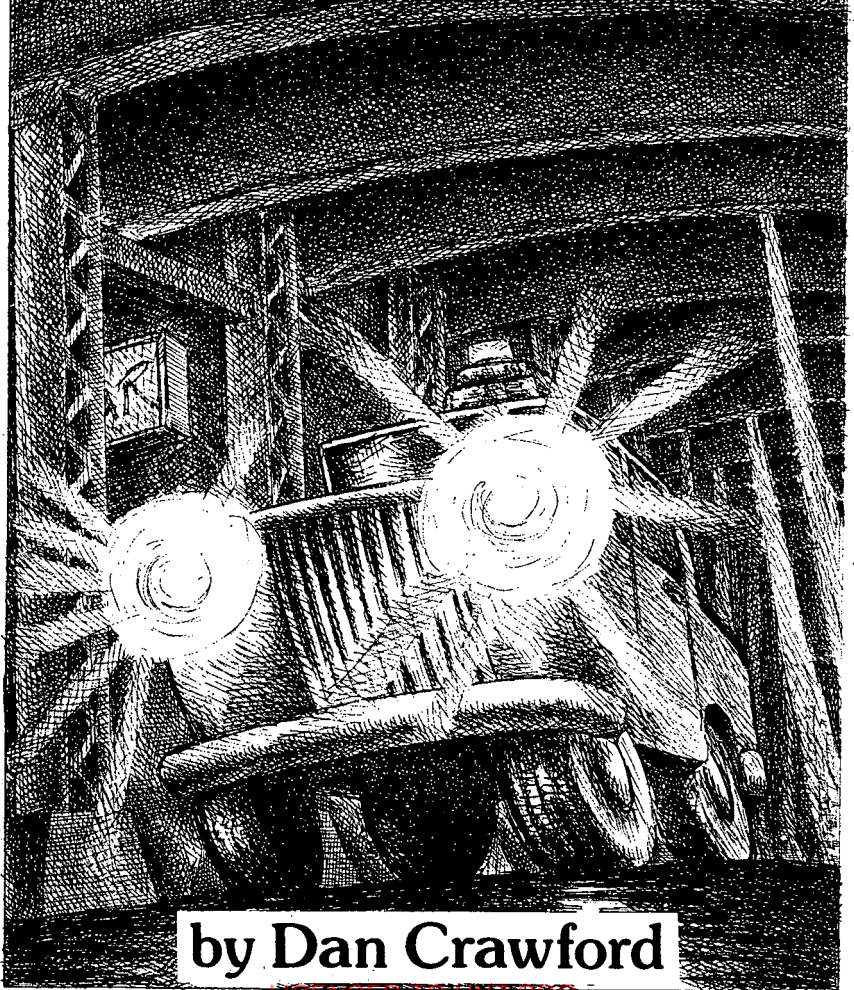
"I wouldn't even have my wife talking to him. Can't have that, I told her. Not one goddamn bit of it. But I caught her writing him a letter t'other day. Tore it up right in front of her and threw it in the fireplace. None of that, I told her. He made his choice, I said. That's that, I told her. And I told her if I ever caught her doin' that again, why—"

The other aide came up. Louie stood and moved towards him to examine the slightly twisted walker, and so neither of them heard the old man finish:

"—I'd kill her. 'Course I didn't mean it, but."

FICTION

The Dark, Shining Street



by Dan Crawford

The force field generator on our file cabinets is thirty years out of date. Sometimes it responds to the combination I dial, and sometimes it doesn't. But since it would take me another thirty years to figure out the instructions on the current models, I leave the cabinets the way they are.

Somehow I can never get over the feeling that the office machinery could work; it just doesn't want to. I gave the cabinet a thump that would have cracked my wrist if I had hit it at the right angle. I muttered a few remarks meant for my ears alone, since no one else in the office had ears.

"I beg your pardon?" said the owner of a pair of ears just outside the office. A tall, bland man with black hair and a red suit was holding the door open, reading the glass panel that reads "AJAX DETECTIVE AGENCY, Gordon McGregor, Pres."

He looked around the office, but I was the only person he saw. "Are you, er, President McGregor?" he inquired.

I glanced at the clock but it wasn't quite quitting time yet. "I'm McGregor," I told him. "Come on in."

There were two chairs available. I took the one behind the desk, and he took the one in front. He didn't take his gloves

off, but he didn't ask for anti-septic on the chair before he sat in it, either. He reached inside his vest and brought out a little card that glowed green. This gave his name as Dr. Anthony Holland, and listed a number of initials I did not take the time to look up.

I returned the card and he cached it away. "What can I do for you, Dr. Holland?" I asked him.

He nodded at me. "I assume you know something about what they call the Classic Car Killings?" he said.

"No more than what I get on the news," I told him. "What everybody knows."

It was about that time of month again; the stories were getting longer. For over a year now, an automobile old enough to be a museum piece had been mowing people down on the Pedestrian Traffic Level. After getting half a dozen or so, the killer and his car went into hiding for a month.

"I want the driver," the doctor told me.

"Oh," I said, meaning every syllable.

He leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk without my even having to ask him. "It's hard for a psychiatrist to get good patients these days," he confided. "The police find them and then blank the most

interesting parts of their brains so they can return to society. It would be a great loss to my profession if this fine specimen were to be ruined that way. His choice of such an anachronism, the periodicity of the attacks, make his a mind worthy of study."

Repressing the impulse to say, "Doctor, heal thyself," I put on my best professional manner. "That's very interesting, Dr. Holland," I said. "But better investigators than we at the Ajax have worked on this business. Can you offer me anything to go on that the police don't already have?"

He pushed his head in closer and whispered, "The license number. Interested?"

It seemed that one of his patients had been down on the Pedestrian Level and had been leveled. Dr. Holland was the only physician listed on her records, so he was called in to watch her fade away in the emergency room. She had died muttering what sounded like "21TX21." This was what the doctor had to give me.

He also gave me his card again. I slipped it into the terminal to check his credit rating. It was good enough for me to add my name and charges to the record. Then I bade the doctor good day and walked him to the door.

I waited until he'd had time to get to the elevator and then yelled, "Ajax, do we know anyone who still goes to a psych?"

The door to the next office was ajar. The hinges are designed to leave it that way. A white oval head pushed it farther open and turned yellow eyes on me.

"You want data on the whole run of your acquaintances?" Ajax asked. "Or just the crackpots you've seen in the last few days?"

I waved him in. "Just a rhetorical question, chipbrain," I told him.

"It may be your tailor," he mused, stepping into the office. "I've had my suspicions ever since you got that paisley vest."

Ajax stands about six feet tall. He's a dull, nonreflective, off-white model with clothes painted on to satisfy the ultra-fastidious. There are robots who actually buy clothes in deference to human fashion. He had a personal name, or, rather, a model name, and a serial number. We had agreed to let that rest in the files.

For the record, we were full partners. I was "Pres." just as a figurehead, since there are lots of customers who don't want to talk to a machine. But we worked as a team. He handled research, memory, extrapolation from data, and mechanical

work. I took care of hunches, unreasonable leaps of intuition, and any assignment requiring the presence of a warm body. We were pretty much even in our success rate.

But he had no taste in clothes. "I can tell you weren't programmed for fashion," I told him. "Your mechanical mind can't take in the refinement of personal decoration. You probably don't even know you've got a patch of rust on your elbow."

Ajax is rustproof, but he covered up his elbow anyway. "Yes?" he said. "Tell me how many humans it takes to design a light bulb."

"Pfoo," I said. "You learned that one at the dump." Ajax does volunteer work at a used robot lot on weekends. One thing the development of an artificial brain did for us, it opened up a whole new realm of ethnic humor.

"You heard the doctor?" I said, standing up to go back to the file cabinets.

"Mmm," said Ajax. "There isn't a chance you'll take that number to the police, I suppose?"

"I thought you were listening," I told him, dialing in the combination. "And lose the doctor his specimen?" The force field fizzed and popped. I nearly slammed the generator with my fist again, but remembered

Ajax was there and only tapped it. It fizzed some more.

Ajax came over, brushed my fingers aside, and set the combination himself. The generator hummed. Ajax is not programmed to be able to grin, but I knew what the heavy silence meant.

"So, are you doing anything tonight?" I asked him.

He isn't really programmed to sigh, either, so he said, "I suspect I'm checking back state files for license numbers."

"Bingo," I told him. I reached for my coat. "Meet me on the Pedestrian Level when you finish."

"It could wait until tomorrow," he suggested. "In the morning."

"I want the people who go out at night," I said. "They're the ones who could've seen something. Meet me by the park."

There was another moment of silence. "It has to be the park?" he asked.

"It has to be the park," I replied, cinching in the second belt. "How's the atmosphere?"

He crossed to my desk and put the question to the terminal. "Normal," he said.

"That bad?" I considered taking gloves and a face mask, but that wouldn't look good to the Pedestrians. Anyway, who wants to live forever in this city?

I took the train to the South Loop Station and rode the elevator down to the Pedestrian Level. I was alone on the elevator, a tough wire cage with slick black floors for easier hosing off. It hadn't been hosed off. Dead leaves were caked into the corners with disappointing lottery tickets. They were this year's lottery tickets, which helped date the leaves.

Traffic Stratification had been somebody's nephew's Big Idea: sort the traffic by type and cut down accidents while allowing it to move faster. The throughway was on top, local traffic next, mass transit third, with pedestrians on ground level. The theory was that the Pedestrian Level, protected from the elements by three layers of traffic, could become a nice, dry mall, a shopper's Eldorado.

Then the lighting went bad and never got fixed. The ventilation system started to wheeze. The city council blamed the mayor, and the mayor blamed the city council. No one ever did figure out who got the money. An alderman revealed what the insurance rate for cops who patrolled the pedestrian level was costing in taxes, and the police stopped going there. Pedestrian traffic, if you could afford the alternative, was limited to people-movers in the corridors of your office

building and the few steps it took you to get to your garage or commuter station.

Even if you wanted to risk the air and the Pedestrian gangs, it was hard to get down there. Half the public elevators still worked, but almost every building in the city had closed off its elevators below the third floor, due to the security risk. Many had also closed down their first floors and basements entirely. Other businesses moved into these vacant spaces, with or without permission. Carson's may not have known their historic old first floor now housed Alyssa's House of Squeals.

I crunched out onto the pavement when the elevator stopped. The walkway was made of the same stuff as the elevator floor: one of those asphalt compounds that always look clean. The slatted walls enclosing the walkway had the same timeless look, but the graffiti were getting dingy with age. I stood in the flickering light and looked over a poster that would have been a collector's item by now had people not been scribbling their gang affiliations and romantic preferences on it. No one put up new posters on the Pedestrian Level these days. Even in times of financial squeeze, the business farther up didn't want to encourage

Pedestrian custom. They would have preferred it if Pedestrians never came out of their burrows except to vote.

And aldermen were debating whether letting them vote was a good idea.

I moved out of the elevator vestibule into a vast, empty space, lit by signs and lights but not really very bright. The central section, what had once been the street, was devoid of people. Even though the street was supposed to be safe, Pedestrians hugged the sides of the buildings. They had done that before the Classic Car Killings, too. No one knew why, but people like Dr. Holland had fun guessing.

Except for the graffiti, the stretch of wall by me was featureless. I headed south, following a little runoff gutter clogged with sacks, bottles, and bottles in sacks. The street widened ahead into a great dead square.

It had been a park once, and a very nice park, the last unroofed section of this neighborhood. I fell under a merry-go-round there when I was five. Very popular, the patch of green had pulled in a lot of people who paid a premium to live nearby. A couple of companies built bigger buildings so more people could pay a premium for the privilege. This altruism was so profitable that other companies

put up bigger buildings. People got tired of living in a construction zone, and they noticed little things like the grass dying from lack of sunlight. Big money moved out, and after a few more years, the city roofed over the eyesore.

Dead trees, still festooned with Christmas lights equally dead, served now as roosts for mangy pigeons that had never seen honest daylight. We called them ratbirds. They took off as I walked by, their squeals just shrill enough to be heard over the thrum of overhead traffic and the clanking wheeze of the ventilators. I kicked a loose chunk of concrete. It bobbed a foot away and waited to be kicked again.

The park was pretty empty. Those who could afford to eat were off somewhere, eating. Those who couldn't afford it and might have information to sell were the ones I wanted.

A dusty shaft of sunlight or streetlight from a more affluent neighborhood came through the ceiling to halo a white-haired woman holding down a milk-dewed couch next to a hydrant. She looked up with hope as I ambled over. Winter was coming on and she'd have to worry about rent again.

"I'm with Cable 94 News," I said. "What do you know about the Classic Car Killings?"

She rolled her forehead a bit and sneered. "You're no newsie," she told me. "I can smell cop at six miles."

The cops could smell her at eight. I didn't answer, except to jingle my pocket suggestively.

She licked her lips. "This thing with fiery eyes comes roaring out of the darkness," she said, putting her hands up. "The Kings 'n' Rooks try to stop it, but it stops them, instead. The carnage . . ."

I could tell she was reciting, so I broke in. "Did you see a driver?" I said.

She shrugged. "He didn't stick around." She licked her lips again. "Hey, is this worth a ten or what?"

I tossed her a video game token. It was shiny and she liked it. She talked some more but it was nothing she couldn't have gotten off the news. I left her to her couch and accosted a drab, gray soul who had been trying to slip by in the shadows.

"I don't know anything about it," he told me, trying to remove my hand from his pocket. "I already told everything I know."

This sounded more promising and I clung to his pocket all the way up an alley and into the Organism Theater. This was a palace of prone porn, with a forty foot screen on the ceiling and space for the patrons to lie on the floor and study human

relations. The movie involved three women and a well-constructed robot they hooked up to a motorcycle. I tried to remember the salient points for Ajax.

But that was all I got, except for maybe fleas. He really didn't know anything. He saw the car, he heard the noise. He saw the Kings 'n' Rooks try to shoot it down and saw the car spread the Kings 'n' Rooks across the asphalt. But he didn't have much of an eye for detail. He suggested I rent the news video reconstruction and study that.

I crawled back outside (the ceiling in a prone porn palace isn't but four feet high). As I rose to my feet, a large square shadow said, "I understand you want stuff on the Classic Car Caper."

"Um, yeah," I said, trying to see what was inside the shadow. It had pulled back into the alley.

I went after it, and found a metal cylinder pointed at my chest. "So do we," said the shadow.

You don't move fast when someone points a gun at you. There are a lot of hobbyists out there and you never know what they've designed the weapon to do. I studied my surly informant for hints.

He was a heavy-lidded man with an overhanging brow and

just one eye. The other had been replaced with an undecorative iron starburst. The tip of his nose had been removed to assist in the general impression, and he wore a barbed-wire bow tie.

"We're the Egyptian Queens," he told me, daring me to laugh. I did not laugh. I let my head swivel enough to let him know I was aware of his cohort. (And to be sure they were really there. They were.) Then I smiled. He smiled back, but a little nervously, I think. He didn't know what I was smiling about. Neither did I.

"Hi," I said. "I'm with Cable 94. We're doing . . ."

"You're a cover," he said, raising the gun a little. "A private cop. Cover wouldn't come down here unless he was onto something. We want that car, Cover. A lot of gangs got cycles, but a car . . ."

"Should I come back when you're not busy, Gordon?" asked a slim shadow.

One of my Queen's myrmidons raised another gun. "Hands up," he ordered.

Ajax loves it when they do that. He fires hard rubber balls from his elbows. Those things can knock a man down from thirty-five yards unless he misses. I have never seen Ajax miss.

One elbow was pointed at my personal tormentor, and he went

down. I scooped the gun out of his hand and fired a shot at one of his friends without thinking. Steam blasted out at him: very flashy, but there wasn't much range to it. I dropped the gun. It leaked.

"Good of you to let the murderous brutes escape with their lives," said Ajax, reclining against the alley wall. "I feared for them, knowing how your fiercer nature takes hold of you."

I rubbed my sore hand and then stooped to grab up the gun again. "Here," I said, tossing it at him. "Build one of these into your kneecap and you'll be a real hit at parties. What did you learn from the license?"

Ajax fielded the gun without any trouble and paid no attention to the hot ammunition at all. "The TX in the number indicated a taxi," he replied. "And a famous one, at that. It belonged to a gypsy named Lawrence O'Toole."

I scratched my head. "How could a man with a name like O'Toole be a gypsy?" I demanded.

Ajax shook his head. "A gypsy cab driver," he explained. "That meant he didn't work for either of the big two cab companies."

"They had a monopoly even then?" I said.

He nodded. "Mrs. O'Toole divorced him, saying he spent

more time in the cab than he did at home. Since O'Toole never had much money, she took the cab as part of the settlement. O'Toole went into manual labor and wasn't much good at it. He had a record of violence against co-workers. He went berserk when he learned his former brother-in-law, also a gypsy cab driver, lost O'Toole's cab going off a bridge at ninety. The brother-in-law got out, but the cab went to the bottom of the river. O'Toole nearly killed his foreman and went to court, where they dug up the fact that he was an illegal alien. He committed suicide in his cell, and then people started seeing his cab."

"I thought it was at the bottom of the river," I said.

"That's why the case was famous," Ajax replied, rubbing his thumbs together. "It was only seen during certain phases of the moon, after dark. One witness claimed to have seen the cab rising from the river." He paused and added, "He said it started as a . . . a rusting hulk but reformed into the cab it had been."

"What?" I demanded. "You mean it was supposed to be the ghost of a dead cab? Or do machines die?"

He looked away. "I don't know, Gordon," he said.

I had forgotten that this might

be a subject of more than theoretical interest to him. I cleared my throat. "So what did this cab do?"

"Pretty much what it's doing now," he told me. "Run down a dozen people or so and then disappear until the moon was right again. It was instrumental in leading to the crackdown on cab licensing in 1997 and was a big factor in the segregation of traffic levels."

"Mm," I said. "And when was it last seen?"

"Eighty years ago," he said.

I rolled that around in my mind. "Hasn't anybody else made the connection between that cab and this one?"

"Even the doctor didn't know this was a taxi," Ajax pointed out. "And the stories about a . . . a derelict cab rising from the river were dismissed after an habitual confessor confessed he'd been doing it in his own private car. It didn't look at all like the cab witnesses had seen, but they took him up on it and the killings stopped about the same time. He died in 2019."

"Why would it start over again now?" I asked. Ajax said nothing, and isn't built to shrug. "Is the moon right tonight?"

"Yes."

I looked around at the dark asphalt. "Then we'll probably see some action. I've read about this kind of thing, some char-

acter recreating the M.O. of another criminal, but I've never had to track one before." The streets and alleys were dark, and nearly empty. "It'll be like chasing Jack the Ripper."

"You need fog for that," said Ajax.

"This place could always use a little fog." I clapped him on the shoulder. (Softly; I haven't been his partner for two years without learning anything.) "Let's check this out block by block. You start up Dearborn and I'll keep on this way."

He nodded. "Be careful, Gordon," he said.

"Ho, didn't you see how I bested those hairy hoodlums?" I demanded. "I know the tricks."

"But they don't work as well when I'm not there," he noted, and ambled away into the shadows. I didn't waste time telling him what I thought of him. So many of the words make no sense at all when applied to someone inorganic.

I sifted through the streets for a while. If there had been any market for used lottery tickets or broken plastic trays, I could have made my pile, but I got no satisfaction out of it otherwise. It was dead quiet. A lot of joints had closed early, their doorways gated for the night, and if the gangs were as busy as the police statistics claimed, they were busy some-

where else. Now that the police didn't bother with the Pedestrian Level, the Classic Car Killer seemed to be the best peacekeeper on the block. I made a mental note to check possible vigilantes, or off-duty cops, and made another note to check the records of the victims. Very likely they weren't spotless souls either.

My brain isn't multi-leveled like Ajax's. I was so busy making mental notes that it took a while for me to notice a deep thrumming sound added to the usual grunt of the ventilation systems. It was nothing I was familiar with, and seemed to be getting louder. I turned in the direction I thought it was coming from.

A tiny yellow light was bobbling toward me. The overhead lights that still worked were too slathered with stickers to show much, but when it passed under a store sign, I saw the light came from a taxi beacon on top of a long green cab. The car dominated the shadows it loomed out of, and though I knew it couldn't be more than two stories high, under that ceiling, it looked like an aircraft carrier to me.

I've always liked antique cars myself, but this was the first one I'd seen from this particular angle. In pictures, they look like heavy, clunky things, but

right now what I noticed was weight and power.

A blast on the horn panicked a bony dog that had wandered into the car's path. It made a run for safety, across the front, and was bounced away somewhere to rattle a few bats from the rafters. Gleaming radiator chrome seemed to grin.

I stood there, in awe of the muscle behind this machine, until I realized I was in the middle of clear pavement and the best target for miles. The horn blared again. I pulled out a noisemaker of my own and took a step back.

Those old cars came equipped with headlights. These snapped on and pinned my eyes shut. I started to run, like the dog, without caring where I went. That wouldn't do. Pulling myself up, I planted my feet. The car had to be in there somewhere. I fired ahead and down, assuming the tires would be antique inflatable rubber jobbies. You couldn't have proved it by me. The lights kept growing.

I couldn't see the driver but assumed he could see me all right. I fainted two steps to the left and then flew back to the right. I felt the rush of wind on my ankles.

The lights were off me for a second. I rubbed my eyes. Tires squeaked and squealed as the driver came around for another

chance. Without a sword and red cape, I didn't feel inclined to oblige.

An alley was within reach. With luck, there might be something big enough to hide behind, if there was anything big enough to stop this archaic juggernaut. If the alley was narrow enough, maybe the cab's bulk would get it wedged and I could have a heart-to-heart with the driver.

But we both made it through, scattering a dozen Pedestrians who were on their way out of a Sali restaurant. The driver was distracted by the herd, and I found a doorway where I could stop, catch my breath, and think.

Actually, I just stopped and caught my breath. The sound of traffic was louder here, and all I could think was that a thousand cars were passing over my head every sixty seconds and giving me no trouble at all.

Since I wasn't thinking, I went on reflex. On the street, the cab was taking aim at a Pedestrian who must have been about eight years old. I fired four shots to attract the driver's attention, waited to be sure he had me in his sights, and then took off again.

I didn't get far. One foot tore into a pile of sodden leaves and I rolled out into the clear, skinning my hands and rattling my gun. The cold, wet pavement was perfect for dying on.

Well, as I said, I know the tricks. "Ajax!" I roared, as the cab bore down on me.

The taxi swerved at that moment, as if spotting a new target. I rolled onto my belly as the behemoth roared past, getting off three shots. The spray of lead seemed to have made a hole in the left fender, but I couldn't be sure. I heard a heavy clank as the shadows swallowed the car.

"Ajax?" I yelled. There was no answer.

My eyes were useless at the moment, but I climbed to my feet and ran after the little red taillights. At last I decided they weren't taillights but the blinking afterdazzle of the spotlights in front. But I kept running anyway until I saw a metal man sprawled on the walkway.

I put a hand down to him. "Fine position for someone programmed in grace and maneuverability," I told him. "Did you let the murderous brute escape with his life?"

He looked left and right, but the cab was nowhere in sight. His arms flexed and I saw a dark dent in one. "I thought your coat was shockproof," I said.

He put a hand over the dented elbow. "We are not dealing with an ordinary machine," he told me.

I agreed. "No ordinary car could do that, not even an old

one. Someone must have made a replica cab out of some new metal. Did you see anything of the driver?"

He hadn't been listening. "A machine gone wrong," he said, mostly to himself.

I shook his good elbow. "Did you see the driver?" I repeated.

He stared at me. "Gordon," he said. "There was no driver."

I waited just long enough to be sure he wasn't pulling my leg. "That'll upset the doctor," I told him.

He was pretty rocky and I didn't feel all that sturdy myself, so we went home. If neither my weaponry nor Ajax's would stop the car, there wasn't much point in waiting.

We went back to work the next morning, in the safety of the DeWitt Building, a good thirty-four stories above the nearest traffic level. The news had accounts of five more killings, including a couple of the Egyptian Queens. I expected the doctor and I got him. I told him what we'd seen, and he wanted me to make an appointment to visit him at his office.

"Trying to get some of the money back?" I demanded. "It's too early for that. Right now we're checking out car hobbyists with an interest in crime. One of them might have designed a remote."

He accepted that, a bit grudgingly. "I wouldn't have thought

of that," he admitted. "You're very clever."

"I'm just a guy who looks at things," I told him, on his way to the door. Once it was shut, I added, "And I'll be looking at you next, doc."

"You don't suppose it really was a remote?" Ajax asked me. "It would have to be a good one, since it ranged all over the Pedestrian Level last night, picking out targets."

"We'll find out," I told him. "We've got a month."

Well, we didn't find out. I checked hobby shops, body shops, and every recorded theft at science museums over the past decade. I found nothing but the cold trail of the police, who had thought of checking all those places months before I did. At the end of the month, all I had that they didn't have was Ajax's story of a ghost cab bent on revenge.

The Ajax Agency did have other business during the month: some warehouse thievery, a man who wasn't going to lunch where he told his boss he was, and other small-commission cases. There was nothing requiring concentration, which was just as well, since I was the only brain working on them. The mechanical mind of the agency was preoccupied.

Ajax read every book there was available (all three of them)

on the occult and machinery. Then he went in for more arcane research. He was probably the first robot ever to set foot inside some of the bookstores he haunted over the ensuing weeks. Computer brains, in general, don't touch anything quite so iffy.

"We aren't making that much money off this case," I informed him one Friday afternoon. "Is it a personal vendetta?"

"It has to be stopped, Gordon," he told me. "If it does turn out to be a machine killing of its own volition, things could get ugly for those of us who're mechanical."

He was grim about it. "That's right," I told him. "Blame it all on the cab. There are probably very good reasons robots never get ahead."

"Oh, of course," he replied, his affable self again. "It's because we're forbidden to buy robots to do our work for us." I wondered whether I liked him better when he was grim.

His whole brain was turned over to the question (he even gave up his weekends for research), and when he announced that the moon was right to go hunting again, I didn't question his conclusions. We pooled our data, such as it was. I had nothing but negative facts, myself.

"The doctor seems to be clean,"

I reported. "There's only one remote kit for sale that has that kind of range and vision capabilities, and it doesn't work. I can't find any remote builders who build antique cabs, or antique cab fanciers who work with remotes. Nobody's missing an old taxi."

"So either we're dealing with the supernatural or you're a crummy detective," said Ajax.

"Do I have to choose the one I like better?" I asked.

"I already chose," he said. "It has to be something supernatural. But don't let it go to your head."

I put my elbows on his desk. "Okay. Why does it have to be something supernatural?"

He pressed a few pads on his terminal. "A lot of little things, Gordon," he said. "No driver was ever caught. Because there wasn't one. No trap ever succeeded. Because the traps were meant to catch ordinary machinery, with a human driver. Ah! And here: six witnesses reported seeing, in place of a taxi medallion, a rust spot in the shape of a five-pointed star."

He said this with such triumph I didn't have the heart to ask him what he meant. "Let's say you're right," I said. "What do we do to stop it?"

Triumph faded. His chin came down and he stared at his desk-top. "I don't know," he

said. "It must be stopped."

He looked me over as if measuring me for a new suit. Then, not glancing down, he opened a drawer and brought out a bundle. A jerk on the free end sent it rolling. Three screwdrivers slid out.

"They're silver," he said. His arms shook as if in a shiver.

I stared at them. "You mean as in a silver bullet?" I said.

His head turned away; he nodded. "It might work," he told me. "I don't know. It's the best I've got."

There was something in the way he said "I've." "So. You going to do it alone, or do you need help?"

"I need help," he said. He flicked the nearest screwdriver with the tip of one finger. "You take these."

I did, without much enthusiasm. "Great," I said. "How do I get close enough to use them?"

He was still looking at something off in a corner somewhere. "We'll find out when we get there," he replied.

I did not like his voice. Ajax was generally serious about his work, but I'd never known him to be like this. "We're only risking life and limb against a metal zombie," I told him. "Loosen up."

His eyes came back to me. "You know if I loosen up, my arms fall off," he said.

He should have gone into comedy; he was built with a straight face. "Ajax, you're a weebus," I told him. "You must have a plan; I've never seen you without one. Not necessarily a good plan, of course, but one can't expect metal brains . . ."

He called up a map of the Pedestrian Level. "We can start where we were the last time," he told me, breaking in without any respect for my superior human wisdom. "State is good; there's lots of room for the car to move. You take Wabash. We'll both move south. After checking each block we'll signal to each other with a flash-light before going on to the next one."

"What are we looking for?"

"Any evidence that I'm wrong." He spread one hand out, with all the fingers pointed at me. "But I'm not wrong," he went on, "and essentially we're only killing time until it finds us. If you yell, or fail to signal to me at the end of a block, I'll come after you. Head south, for the park; the playground equipment might slow it down."

"That's possible," I said, doubting it. "And then?"

He let his fingers run across the desktop. "Why, then, you, being the Prop. and Pres. of the Ajax, will naturally wrestle it to the ground. What else?"

"Thank you," I told him. "Good

of you to give me the fun job. Why are you coming along at all, then, since I can obviously handle all these little details myself? Taking pictures for the tabloids?"

Ajax is programmed to chuckle, but it sounded as though his program needed an overhaul. He checked the time and stood up. "I'll meet you at the elevator at six then," he told me. His fingertips slid across the top of the computer. "I have a couple of errands to take care of."

"I knew it," I said as he moved out. "Film for the camera, right?"

He didn't answer. I didn't see him again until six, in the elevator, and then we just traded nods. It wasn't a night for jokes. Water dripped from the roof of our cage, and as we went down, the machinery gave off painful creaks and groans. Something in the sound made me believe there were more things than humans that could die.

Wabash Street was dead. It was cold, and the lights were out. Not even occasional maintenance was practiced here, and nothing much worked. The only consolation was in the rusting pillars of a long-defunct El line. Let the cab try breaking its bumpers on those.

Anticipation tingled in my tongue and in my palms. I put

my free hand down to check the screwdrivers in my belt, and then my gun. I had applied for, and gotten, a more potent gun. But I didn't spring for silver bullets.

The first three or four blocks went according to plan. I pointed my light into a few abandoned storefronts that would've made nice places to hide a remote-controlled cab. No such luck. Just try to get a taxi on a cold night.

I was delayed under the shingle of a Doctor of Holographology when an earnest entrepreneur offered me shelter and a bit of exercise. Pale gray and a bit gelid, she had a sculptured body that rippled with the promise of pleasure. She also had three grooves in her forehead, and drooled a lot. I take a rather holistic attitude to sex and so passed up her special offer.

"May your hands and feet wither," she said jovially. "And may you be reduced to renting your buttocks out for target practice." I would've stopped and written that one down if I'd had any mind for literature. It loses something without the emphasis and hand gestures, though.

I didn't have any snappy answer ready. My mind was entirely on antique cabs. The dimensions and specifications

I had turned up over the past month were faint in my memory. Imagination had taken charge, making the cab twice as big, twice as loud, and four times as fast, endowing it with savage cunning and lethal intellect.

Then it turned a corner and my imagination looked anemic.

The monster skidded onto our street, kicking up water-soaked debris from the pavement. I had time to turn my light on it and verify for myself that there was nobody at the wheel. Then the cab returned the favor and, pinned by the headlights, at least one of us screamed.

I threw my flashlight at the windshield and set off straight in front of it, hoping to draw it away from the woman. I succeeded beyond my wildest nightmares. There was no place to hide in the glare from its lights. The El columns looked suddenly too flimsy for shelter but just strong enough to be smashed against. I had my gun out and squeezed off a few shots. That was useless; there must not have been an inch of real glass in the whole car.

Now what? I was supposed to run south, but the car was south of me. Ajax hadn't covered that. Or did he expect me to get it by one wheel and throw it over my shoulder?

The light was getting more intense. Just before I became a hood ornament I spied a hanging sign for a Tarot Vibrancies Expert. It was never too late to take an interest in the supernatural, I felt. I jumped up and caught the slippery plastic. My heels went up and over the sign and the taxi beacon ripped my shirt in passing.

"Yeah, bo!" yelled someone from a window. I took no bows.

The sign wasn't easy to hang onto and, for all I knew, the damn cab could jump. I let go and hit the ground, stretching my legs as though the home team were behind by four and I had thirty clear yards between me and the goal line. I glanced back to see the biggest, meanest tackle that ever lived spin and come after me.

Well, it had worked once. "Ajax!" I screamed.

At the same time I put one foot ankle-deep into a pothole. I went rolling, and while I was busy with that, the cab caught up with me.

It missed by inches, skidding on the pavement. One door screeched against an El column and the front bumper nearly went through a display window. Either the cab was playing with me or it didn't have studed tires.

Finding my feet, I used them for what they were meant to do.

"Ajax!" I yelled again. "Shake your rods!"

The cab pulled back onto the pavement and came after me. The spotlight waved back and forth, though; the headlights or the car itself wobbled. The El column and I must have accounted for something vital.

"Ajax!" I called. "Come and get it!"

The terror taxi hit a little ridge of concrete around what had once been a patch of greenery and was now an ashtray. It bounded into the air. If it spread wings and stayed up, I decided, I would lie down where I was and take my medicine. I know when to quit.

But there was no vampire in its family tree, and the cab hit the street again with a sound like cities collapsing. It stayed where it was for a second, gathering strength, and then took off again. I was wobbling by this time myself, coughing out some of the gritty air I had inhaled. But my foot struck a patch of mud and I knew I was in the park.

Following, the cab still had enough momentum to snap the basketball hoop off at the base and send it skidding back onto the pavement. A host of rats and birds rattled toward the roof.

I remembered that the point of taking refuge here was to do damage. I hauled myself up

onto the merry-go-round. "Your mother was a garbage truck!" I called.

The cab came on, grinding an upturned garbage can into staples under its wheels. I stayed on my home base. The central column of the whirlwheel was rooted in concrete. I was betting it could resist a direct hit.

I never did find out. The cab slid sideways at the last minute, glancing off the edge. The merry-go-round spun in one direction and the cab spun away in the other. I kept one arm on a support bar and wrapped the other around my stomach, in case it flew off before I did.

The screwdrivers were working loose from my belt. Remembering battle tactics learned through winters on this playground, this merry-go-round, I pulled one free. When the spin took me around toward the cab again, I let it fly at my metal enemy.

"Ajax," I muttered, "I hope you knew what you were doing."

Light smashed around my head and the park shook. I went flying off the merry-go-round and likely would have left the park completely if the swing set hadn't broken my flight.

When it was dark again, and quiet enough for me to move my head without wincing, I looked up. Ajax was sitting on the ground, looking as dazed as I

felt. The taxi was gone.

I crawled forward, keeping one eye open for anything on wheels. "About time you got here," I panted.

He looked at me and then at the ground. "The screwdriver," he said. "Where is it?"

It was just under his left leg. I pulled it free. "Keep it on me!" he ordered. "I might go back!"

I touched it to his chest. He winced, a momentary flash of silver in golden eyes. "Go back?" I said.

He seemed to be trying to catch his breath, though he'd never had any. "The cab," he said. "21TX21? It went mad."

"Okay," I said. This seemed as reasonable to me as anything else.

"It couldn't communicate," he said. "But it was sentient. This happens to the lower machines, if they have too close and too constant contact with one human. It gets to the higher ones sometimes, too. One more year with you and I'd have been buying those gray paisley vests."

I let that pass. "Was this before or after it went into the river?"

Now he really shuddered; I could feel the vibration through the screwdriver. "Before," he said. "But it was still sentient, and when it felt its owner die, it came out under its own power. It was powered by madness and

hatred, and it aimed at the first vehicle it saw on land: a bulldozer. It was finished as soon as it made impact. All the police found in the morning was an ... unidentifiable derelict."

"If it was destroyed right away," I said, "how did it kill so many?"

He nodded, acknowledging a reasonable question. But he waited a second before coming back with an unreasonable answer. "When the full moon came again, the bulldozer took on the shape and personality of 21TX-21, and went on a killing spree. The madness was so strong that it survived the destruction of the original carrier. Worse, it could be communicated. The humans hit by the bulldozer-cab died, but any car that survived the hit would go through a similar transformation the following month, receiving not only the madness and blood lust of the mad cab, but the power of the bulldozer as well. In the morning, they'd return to their normal shapes and temperaments, except for a five-pointed rust spot that couldn't be painted over."

"How many of these things were there?" I asked him.

He tried and failed to shrug. There was a long tear in one shoulder. "There might have been as many as seven or eight at any one time. The normal

means of passing the curse is naturally disabling, so a lot were destroyed that way, or destroyed themselves trying to break out of garages. Nobody connected this with the killing sprees; they blamed it on vandalism or attempted car theft. The curse would have worn itself out, eventually, but one of the last of the killer cabs, just a month before they locked up the man who confessed, went through a window into an office building. The cab was destroyed, and the only other one remaining—the bulldozer—went off a bridge the same night."

"So it did wear itself out," I said.

He shook his head. "The car that went into the office building hit one of those robot carts they used to carry coffee and rolls around the offices. He was Coffie 312A X371CDA. Severely damaged, he was tucked away in a warehouse; the company figured it was cheaper to buy a new one than repair him. He stayed there for decades, unable to move, until the building was sold. He wound up in the used lot, where I found him and got him on his feet again."

"I see."

"He was grateful," said Ajax. "I learned a lot from him about robot life early in the century. When he was fully operational,

I helped him get a job in a coffee shop on the Pedestrian Level."

"Ah," I said.

"He turned up one morning back at the lot, battered beyond repair. He was . . . junked." Ajax paused again. "This was eight months ago."

Things were getting worse. "Eight months?"

"He died eight months ago and the killings have gone on," Ajax said, in case I hadn't figured that much out. "It could've been an accident; he wasn't very fast. But it happened the day after a full moon, and I had noticed his rust spot several times. It was only a couple of weeks ago that I learned what that meant, and made the connection with what happened to him in the days of the first killer cabs. Once I had the hypothesis that he was himself a killer cab, I hunted for someone he might have hit. None of the other people at the lot had the spot, and there wasn't much he could hit on this level."

He glanced down at his elbow. That dark spot was rust, after all.

"I checked my memory backward, day by day. There were blank spaces on nights when the moon was full, and there shouldn't have been blank spots."

I cleared my throat. "How much of this have you verified

and how much is guesswork?" I asked him. "Can you be sure the cab doesn't give off some kind of magnetic field that could have damaged your memory?"

"My memory's fine," he told me, without any heat. "It started last month, when you shouted my name while I was in cab form. The blank spaces started to fill in. At first I wasn't sure that was what was happening. I've been meaning to have a few parts checked, but kept putting it off. Those strange memories might have been hallucinations, malfunctions. But they aren't. I have access to the memories of all killer cabs who preceded me, in a direct line to the . . . original."

"You're positive?" I asked.

He nodded. "I am the Classic Car Killer," he said. "The latest one, at least. The only way out now is for me to be disassembled."

"No," I told him.

"And it has to be a human who does it."

"No."

"You can't touch me with anything more complex than a screwdriver," he went on. "I can't be sure that anything with moving parts might not be affected."

"No," I said again.

He shook his head. "I've gone into this very thoroughly, Gordon. There is no other way. If

you don't do it, I'll kill again. And any machinery I hit may carry on the curse until there's a fleet of us. And . . . machinery thinks more clearly than it did a century ago. We'd be more dangerous."

"I could lock you up," I suggested.

"Lock!" he said. "The 21TX21 would smash out, and for all you know, the lock might contract the curse." He raised a hand. "That merry-go-round may be lethal now. If you used a force field lock, the next killer cabs might well have that in their arsenal as well."

"But by next month," I urged, "we might be able to find someone with a cure, who . . ."

He did laugh, out loud. "Cure?" he demanded. "You're the one they'd try to cure! Humankind hasn't figured out organic lycanthropes yet. If you start claiming to have a mechanical one, it could bring back psychiatry."

"Your brain circuits," I suggested. "They could be saved, transferred to another body."

"Gordon, the brain circuits are the key," he cried. "It was working on Coffie's brain that

passed the curse on to *me*. If you so much as set my brain on your desk, your terminal could well turn into a long green cab this time next month. Do it, Gordon."

He told me what to do. My blood froze. "Okay," I whispered. "But . . . not here." I looked around at the ratbirds on the swing set. I don't know why I thought it was an inappropriate place to kill a friend of mine.

"Here," said Ajax. "Now. Before we both lose our nerve."

I did it. He helped by averting his face and not speaking again except for one whisper of "Do things have souls?"

"What?" I said.

"Nothing," he told me. "Sorry. Goodbye, Gordon."

I carried him back to the office in a garbage bag. As requested, I laminated each piece separately, and then dropped each piece, with the contaminated laminator, into the office trash blaster.

"I'll have to refund Dr. Holland's money, you dumb machine," I told him. I shut the lid. I'd have dropped in a flower if I'd known where to find one.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



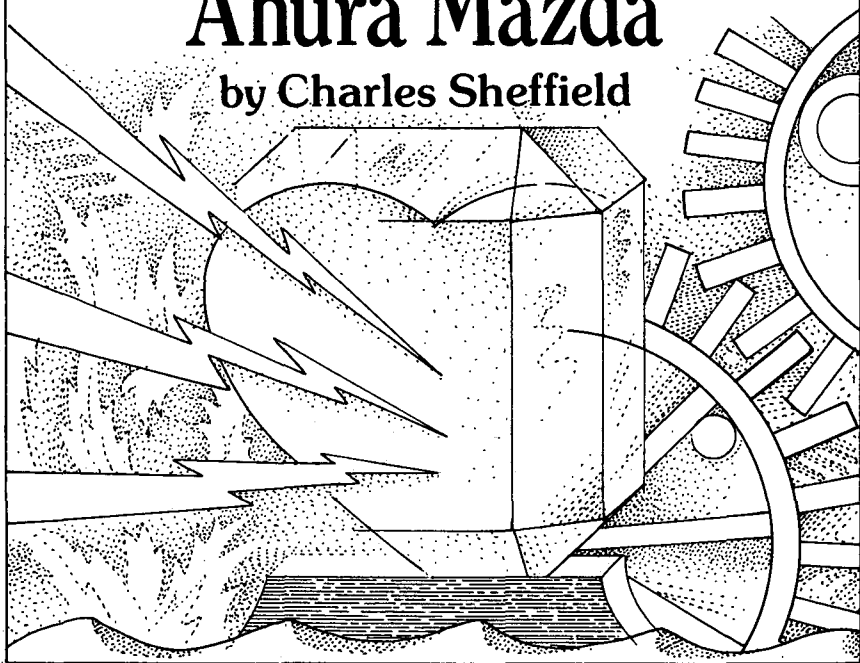
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Deep six? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 139.

The Heart of Ahura Mazda

by Charles Sheffield



The young man in the expensive topcoat leaned casually against the tavern wall and sipped at a pint of dark ale. He was eavesdropping and trying to disguise the fact, although the two people sitting in the corner were too absorbed in their own conversation to care in the slightest if they were overheard.

They were an ill-assorted pair. The one leaning on the table was well into his sixties, and instead of a wig he wore a round fur hat to cover his domed bald head. Now and again he would illustrate a point he was making with a sharp rap of his nails on the smooth board, or a snap of fingers in the air. His energy and animation of manner suggested a man half his age.

His companion presented a less attractive prospect. He was in his early forties, but his corpulence, lack of front teeth, and jowly

face marked by smallpox conspired to make him look much older. Only the eyes redeemed his coarse appearance. They were grey, patient, and sagacious, and now they twinkled with appreciation of the older man's humor.

"She's very intelligent," the fur-capped man was saying in an English accent that the young man could not place. "Pretty, too. Any man would be proud to be seen with her on his arm. So think of it, Erasmus. You have been a widower too long, maybe it's time that you took another wife."

"Easy for you to suggest—you're already married, even if your lady is living in another country." The fat man gestured at a waitress to bring another pot of beef-tea and a plate of savories to the table. "Marriage is a large step. Answer me this: if you were free, would you honestly wish to be bonded to young Mary? I talk not of *bedding* her, now, I talk of *marriage*. Think of it, Joseph. Within a month she'd have reorganized your whole life." A slight stammer in his voice showed that he was enjoying the banter.

"Preserve me from that. At my age, a man is either organized or he will never tolerate organization. And Mary Rawlings is too young for me—" he held up a hand to forestall comment "—too young for me to *marry*. The years after fifty are like late-season hothouse fruit; their enjoyment must be carefully planned. We have so few of them, and they must be placed on a suitable dish." He pulled out of his waistcoat pocket a curious pair of spectacles that were divided horizontally in each lens, and used them to peer at a tiny fob watch. "No more tea for me. Five minutes, and I must be off. As for Mary, I'm too old and fragile to keep up with her young blood."

The fat man's grey eyes took on a new look, and he sat for a moment with his head cocked to one side. "You'll have to do more than talk, Joseph, to persuade me of your fragility. You appear unnaturally hale, hearty, and energetic."

"Ah, but you have made no examination of me, Dr. Darwin." The fur-capped man was grinning. "If you could see my ruined liver and poor withered body—"

"A competent physician does not need that. The evidence of health is written in your bearing and your countenance." Erasmus Darwin swiveled in his chair so that he could see the whole room of the tavern. "Look around you, now, and read the Book of Nature. See what is stamped on each face and body. There, by the door, side by side, we at once find goiter and rickets."

"No great feat of diagnosis. I can see as much, 'Rasmus, and I'm not a physician."

"Patience. We begin with the easiest. Look along the bar now, and take the men in order. The first is too simple: consumption, in its middle stages. The second is in good health. Take the next one, the ex-soldier in the ragged jacket with his back to us. What do you see?"

His companion adjusted the spectacles on his nose and peered carefully. "Without seeing his face . . . hm. At the least, we have the effects of strong drink."

"Bravo. The half-pint of gin in front of him might be considered a clue, but we certainly admit the harmful effects of alcohol—and what else?"

"Palsy?"

"No." Darwin shook his bewigged head in satisfaction. "That is a symptom, not a cause. Regard the uncertain set of the heels on the floor, and the way the arm moves to reach the glass. You are viewing third-stage syphilis."

"Incurable."

"With today's knowledge. He is far gone. If you could see his face, the ravages would become clear. And the man farther along, in the plum-colored fustian, looking this way and getting ready to leave? What of him?"

"Ruddy face, clear eyes, a strong, square build, and thick black hair. He ought to be as healthy as a horse. But . . ." He paused.

"Aha! State your but. Your instincts are sound, Joseph, but you lack the detailed knowledge to support them. My learned friend, we must go beyond the *superficies* of hair and frame if we are to achieve valid diagnosis." The stammer had vanished from Darwin's voice when the subject was medicine. "Look rather at the color of the lips—is there not a purple tinge to them? Look at the veins in the temple, look at the posture, look at the cheeks, with a suggestion of grey. Look at the strain in his walk. Look at the clubbed fingertips. He suffers from severe and degenerative heart disease."

The older man stared again as the black-haired stranger walked out of the tavern, then shook his head and took off his glasses. "Bedaddle. You are serious, are you not?"

"Completely. That man has perhaps a year to live."

"Scampages! If I did not know you to be a recent visitor to London, I would swear those people must all be your patients. You are lucky, 'Rasmus, that we live in the Age of Reason. Two centuries ago you would have been burned for wizardry. When you sense

such quick mortality, do you not feel an urge to speak to men and women of their diseases?"

"I do. But then I must ask, to what end? If that were my patient in Lichfield, and wealthy, certainly I would discuss his ailment, and suggest a change of life-style. But the man who just left has no such opportunities. He is poor—you saw his shoes?—with no money for medications. Better to allow him to live as happy as he may. With or without my bad news, he will be gone by year's end."

The man in the fur cap threw coins on the table and stood up. "And so must I be gone. I have a meeting across the river in Southwark. Until tonight, then, at seven?"

"And the renewed pleasure of your company." Darwin nodded, but did not rise as his companion buttoned his heavy coat and strode out into the gloom and chill of a February fog. Instead he sat drinking beef-tea and absentmindedly eating his way through the whole tray of cheese and pork savories.

When the young man who had remained hovering by the tavern wall stepped forward to the table, Darwin did not stop eating. He merely nodded and said with a full mouth, "I wondered which of the two of us was the focus of interest when you came in here. I am rather surprised that it is I. Joseph Faulkner is a famous figure, and I am merely a visitor to the city."

"I know it, sir." The other man was uneasy, shifting from foot to foot. He was bareheaded, blond, and clean-shaven, with a blooming, fresh-skinned face that scarce supported a beard. "But it is you that I would like to speak to, rather than your friend. For just a moment. If you can spare the time."

Darwin gazed up at the earnest face. The youth was well-dressed and healthy, but there was a certain stolidity of manner and dullness of eye. Temporary, or permanent? "If it is a medical problem that you suffer . . ."

"No, sir." The young man spoke slowly, with little animation. "Or rather, sir, it is a medical problem, but not my own. It is the problem of—of a friend."

"Ah." Darwin pursed his full lips, then gestured to the seat across the table. "Help yourself to beef-tea, and tell me about your friend. Tell all, root and branch, about your friend—and about yourself. Detail is at the heart of diagnosis."

"Yes, sir." The man sat down. "My name is Jamie Murchison. I am from Scotland. I am here to study medicine with Dr. Warren."

"The best doctor in London. You chose him as your teacher?"

"No, sir. My father chose him for me."

"Ah. But if Warren cannot help you, I am convinced that I can do no better."

"Sir, he says you are his superior, especially in matters of diagnosis. But in any case, I did not consult him, for other reasons. The lady with the problem—"

"Lady!"

"Yes, sir. Is that bad?"

"No. But I owe you an apology. Nine out of ten who so begin, saying that they have a friend with a medical condition, are describing their own problem. I assumed it to be true in your case. Pray continue."

"Yes, sir. The lady is Florence Trustrum. She is nineteen years old and a second cousin to Dr. Warren. I met her through him. She hails from the Isle of Man, and is now in service at the house of your friend, Mr. Faulkner. He does not know me. Florence and I met each other socially four months ago. We are good friends. Two weeks ago, she confided to me a strange physical symptom."

"To what?"

"In certain circumstances she feels a crawling sensation on the skin of her face and arms."

"And that is all?"

"No, sir. At the same time, she feels her hair stand on end, as though she has seen a ghost."

"For which a suitable term would be? If you are a medical student, we may as well exploit the fact."

Murchison frowned, then shook his head. "I don't recall."

"Horripilation, it is called. Remember that."

"Yes, sir. But it is not horra—horri-pil-ation, as Dr. Warren talks of it. Florence does not see gooseflesh, or feel any sense of cold or terror when it happens. She says it can happen when she is cheerful, or relaxed, or thinking of something else. And so I wondered, sir. In your great experience, have you encountered any disease with such symptoms?"

"Never," said Darwin promptly. He rubbed at his jaw, in bad need of a razor. "Have you been with her when it happens? Or has anyone else?"

"Not I. She says Mr. Faulkner was with her on one occasion, and Richard Crosse, who lodges with Mr. Faulkner, on another, but neither man saw or felt anything."

"And the times and places?"

"The times, all different ones. The place, in her own room on the ground floor of Mr. Faulkner's home in St. Mary-le-Bow. I went

there myself. I felt nothing, nor saw anything unusual."

"But you did not consult your teacher, Dr. Warren?"

"No, sir. You see, if Dr. Warren thinks that Florence is ill, he will feel it his responsibility to inform her parents. And they will insist that she return home at once for treatment—they do not understand what a fine doctor she has here. And if she goes to the Isle of Man, while I must stay . . ." Murchison stopped and stared down at the tabletop.

"I understand perfectly. But as to my possible role?"

"Sir, I am only a student. There are many ailments outside my experience. You will be visiting Mr. Faulkner's house tonight, Florence told me that, and you will see her. Perhaps you will find a symptom in her invisible to me. If you would just look at her . . ."

"I will certainly look." Darwin smiled ruefully. "Even without your adjuration, I could not help doing so. Diagnosis is so ingrained in me, it is a way of life."

"Thank you, sir." Murchison relaxed visibly. "You see, she does not *seem* ill. Is there anything that you can think of to explain her condition?"

"Nothing." Darwin shook his head decisively. "No disease that provides such symptoms. But that is not conclusive. In our knowledge of the human body, the best of us are no more than fumbling children. You can take comfort from this: *feeling well* is the best evidence I know of good health. If Florence continues to show no other symptoms than those that you describe, she should not worry. But I confess that I would like to see—"

He was interrupted. An unshaven man carrying a lantern and dressed despite the cold in only dirty trousers and a thin blue shirt had come running into the inn. "Dr. Darwin!" he shouted to the room at large. "Is there a Dr. Darwin here?"

"There is." Darwin began to stand up, groping under the table for his heavy walking stick. "I am he."

The man turned to him. "Emergency, sir." He was gasping for breath. "At the exhibition by the Custom House. They sends me to look for you, and ask you to go there."

Darwin looked quickly at Jamie Murchison, who shook his head. "No doing of mine, sir."

"Then come with me. If you have time to spare, you may add to your store of medical knowledge." Darwin turned back to the panting messenger, at the same time fishing in his pocket and throwing more coins onto the empty plate on the table. "Someone at the exhibition is ill?"

"No, sir." The ill-clad man was already heading for the door, but he turned to show a somber face. "Someone is dead."

"**G**out," said Darwin, as they followed the lantern-bearing messenger through the fog-shrouded London streets.

The long, wan twilight of early February was near its end, and lamps were already burning within every house. It had snowed the day before, but the streets had been well cleared so that only grey mounds of slush remained. Now the yellow lamp-light, bleeding out from tall, narrow windows, fell on the dull snow heaps and did more to emphasize their rounded shadows than to illuminate the pavement and road beyond.

Darwin banged his walking stick hard on the wet cobblestones. "Damnable gout, and damnable weather. Physician, heal thyself—but I have been unable to do so. I diagnose my condition, and I treat it well enough with cupping and with willow bark infusions, but I cannot cure it. This creeping cold brings it to life again. How much farther?"

"A few hundred yards." Jamie Murchison resisted the urge to help Darwin along. The other man was considerably overweight, and a little lame, but he was stumping along cheerfully and energetically. "We must walk along Eastcheap and Great Tower Street, then south to the river. Half a mile at the most. Have you not visited the exhibition yourself, Dr. Darwin? It has been the talk of London, these ten days."

"I have not. When someone tells of priceless jewels, and Persian demons, and Zoroastrian mysteries, I assume that it is merely an attempt to make a mumchance of the whole city."

"But this is different, sir. The ruby was protected by a curse—and now it seems that the curse has shown its power."

"We shall see. In a town full of calculating pigs and dancing bears and fire-eaters and sword-swallowers and purveyors of everything from Cathay aphrodisiacs to Indian opiates to French purges, anything may be claimed. For, in my experience, London draws the charlatans of England as a boil draws the body's poisonous humors. Have you visited this exhibition yourself, Jamie Murchison?"

"Yes, sir. Twice." Murchison was embarrassed. "I went with Florence."

"Then tell me what you saw. I am setting a bad example by my skepticism. In life, as in the examination of a new patient, one

should keep the mind open for novelty of impression. Tell me all."

"You will see it in another minute—we are almost there. But it is simple enough. Two weeks ago, the hall where the exhibition resides was rented by a Persian, Daryush Sharani, for the purpose of displaying a magnificent ruby of vast age and religious significance. It is known as the Heart of Ahura Mazda, and it is huge—the size of a man's fist. But the thing that made the exhibition unique and attracted so much public attention is that although Sharani stays always with the gem, he disdains other guards. He insists that the Heart carries with it its own protection, in the form of a curse within the stone. The curse of Ahura Mazda invokes a demon, who binds and makes helpless anyone who touches the jewel. If the demon is not quickly banished, the would-be thief will die."

"Easy enough to say. Did anyone test the Persian's claims?"

"They did, when the exhibition began. With a hundred people watching, four men tried to take the jewel while Sharani stood by smiling. As soon as each one touched the stone, they were bound rigid until Sharani leaned over the Heart of Ahura Mazda and whispered the invocation that controls the demon. Then the men were released, and able to move freely."

Murchison heard Darwin's skeptical grunt. "I felt as perhaps you are feeling, sir," he went on, "that it is easy enough to pay a poor man to stand still for a few minutes, and have him say he was frozen by the curse. But one of the four was a nobleman, the Earl of Marbury, who is far beyond bribery and above corruption. He swore that as he tried to lift the Heart of Ahura Mazda he was seized by the demon, and unable to move until Sharani invoked the words of release."

They had reached the hall, a rectangular building of grey limestone fifty yards from the river. The double entrance doors were iron-bound oak, open now but carrying two heavy padlocks. On the left-hand door was pinned an announcement that the Heart of Ahura Mazda would be on display from January 30th to April 25th. The right-hand door showed the admission price of twopence per person per visit.

Within, half a dozen oil lamps lit an oblong sanded floor, in the center of which stood a large metal plate. Upon the plate was a silver pedestal, and on top of that an empty cushion of black velvet within a hemisphere of glass.

The messenger and Murchison hurried on at once towards the far wall where a motionless human form lay surrounded by a group

of four men. But Darwin stood just two steps inside the door, wrinkling his nose in perplexity and sniffing the air. It was ten more seconds before he walked forward, moving to study the pedestal and its empty cover. Finally he banged his walking stick hard on the stone floor, to produce a hollow boom that echoed around the hall, and then walked forward to join the others.

The body lay supine, blue eyes open and arms thrown wide. Darwin knelt down beside it, and grunted in astonishment. It was the black-haired stranger from the Boar's Head Tavern.

"And who are you, sir?" asked one of the men standing by the body. He was well dressed in heavy woollen coat, leather boots, and gaiters, and he wore clerical garb. "The magistrate has already been called."

"I am Erasmus Darwin, a physician." Darwin did not look up. "But I fear that I can do nothing for this man. Does anyone here know him?"

"I do, sir." It was a watchman carrying a staff and a shielded lantern. "He's been regular in these parts these two year, an' often 'anging around when jewelery an' plate goes a-missin'. But nuffin's been proved, not near enuff for a dance at Tyburn."

"You sent for me when you found him?"

"No, sir. Not I."

"Then which one of you did send for me?"

There was a silence. Darwin turned to the messenger, who shook his greasy head firmly. "None of these gentlemen, sir. I was given a florin in Lower Thames Street, by a man I never seed before. He said there was somebody a-dying in the Exhibition Hall, and I was to go to the Boar's Head an' bring Dr. Erasmus Darwin."

"I saw this man alive, in that same tavern, less than an hour ago." Darwin bent to grasp the man's wrist, and to touch him on temple, mouth, and at the hollow of his neck. He loosened the fustian jacket, and made a rapid examination of chest and abdomen, then stood up. "He has been dead less than thirty minutes. Who found him?"

"Me it was." The grubby watchman lifted his staff. "On me first round. I sees a window open at the back, so I come to the front an' let meself in." He held up a heavy bunch of keys. "An' there he was. Dead as mutton. And the jewel—gone."

"He is just where you found him?"

"Yessir. I think he staggers back here, see, tryin' to reach the winder, but 'e dies 'fore he gets to it."

Darwin shook his head and pointed to the sanded floor. In the

lantern light, a pair of wavy lines ran from the metal plate and pedestal to the wet, battered shoes of the dead man. "He was dragged this way. You are sure no one here pulled him?"

"Positive, sir." The man in clerical dress spoke again. "I was passing by, and came in straight on the watchman's heels. The man was exactly as you see him when we entered."

"Just as the demon left him," said a ragged man softly. The little group of people stirred and looked around the shadowed hall.

"Now then, we'll have no blasphemies here," said the clergyman mildly. "When a man dies, there is no need to call for demons. I'm sure the doctor can tell us the natural cause of death."

The men around the body looked at Darwin expectantly. He hunched his shoulders, and shook his head in irritation. "The obvious diagnosis is a massive heart failure, but it is not a reply I can offer in good conscience. I saw this man earlier today, and observed him closely. He was not at the point of death. And I am sure that this was not present." Darwin stooped, and lifted the limp right arm of the dead man. As he turned it, an ugly purple triangle about an inch across was revealed on the palm of the hand.

"The Mark of the Beast!" Everyone except Darwin and Murchison took a pace back.

"Nonsense." The clergyman's voice sounded less confident than his words. "It is a simple wound—a burn. Is that not so, sir?"

"It is not." Darwin gestured at Murchison, who had sunk to his knees to study the mark more closely. "No medical student would admit such a conclusion were I to draw it. But as to what it is . . ." He fell silent, then looked up. "I would like a chance to examine the body more fully. I have seen nothing like this in twenty years as a physician."

He straightened, and walked across to the pedestal. He lifted it, in spite of Jamie Murchison's cry, "Be careful!"

"Careful of what?" Darwin peered at the empty setting of black velvet, then at the silvered sides of the pedestal. "If there is no demon who guards the Heart of Ahura Mazda, then surely I am in no danger. And if there is a demon who accompanies the ruby, since the ruby is not here, again I am safe."

"So you truly believe we have a—a—" The clergyman had followed Darwin, but he could not bring himself to say "demon." "A great mystery," he concluded.

"No, sir." Darwin's fat face had tightened with powerful curiosity. "We do not have a mystery. We have at least five of them. How did that man die? Who or what killed him? Where is the Heart

of Ahura Mazda now? Where is its faithful guardian, Daryush Sharani, and why did he run away? And finally—least perhaps, but also perhaps strangest of all—*who summoned me here to serve a dead man*—when I am a servant of the living?”

Dinner at Joseph Faulkner's house had taken a curious turn. The half-dozen guests had been drawn there by the promise of rare scientific and literary conversation from the eminent visiting physician and inventor from the Midlands. Instead they found a Darwin who was thoughtful and preoccupied. He ate his share and more of beef, parsnips, Yorkshire pudding, and horseradish sauce, but he allowed others to carry the full social burden until brandied plums and cream had appeared on the table and been disposed of. At that point he roused himself, poked with his finger for a fragment of meat lodged in his back teeth, and said: "Gentlemen—and ladies, too, if you have a mind to play a game. I would like to propose a curious puzzle, a matter on which your thoughts and opinions would be most valued."

"At last!" Joseph Faulkner waved a hand around the table. "Speak on, Erasmus. Now I will confess it, I was worried by your silence tonight. The rest of us have said quite enough. My friends all came here to hear you."

"Then they may be disappointed. For I have no answers, only questions." Darwin looked around the room, well-lit by wall candelabra and ceiling chandeliers, and found every eye on him. "Let me relate the events that befell me this afternoon."

He told it carefully, summarizing everything from the arrival of the messenger at the Boar's Head Tavern to his own departure from the Exhibition Hall for Faulkner's house. As he spoke, he studied the others around the table.

It was a curious and curiously varied group. Joseph Faulkner kept an unusually egalitarian household, with a suitably unconventional seating arrangement for both guests and servants. Darwin was at one end of the dining table. At the far end was their host, and on Faulkner's left sat Mary Rawlings, a thirty-year-old redhead with milky skin and a determined look in her blue eyes. She had her hand often and possessively on Faulkner's arm. Darwin had shrugged mentally. His own views were liberal. Mary must know that Faulkner had a wife across the Atlantic, and she was old enough to make her own decisions.

At mid-table there was an empty chair, intended for a manufacturer of agricultural equipment who had been detained by busi-

ness in Norwich. He had sent his apologies, and into the vacant place Jamie Murchison's heartache, brown-haired and blue-eyed Florence Trustrum, had slipped at the end of the meal. She quietly helped herself to preserved plums and coffee. Joseph Faulkner had no respect for the traditional class separations, and her switch from servant to diner excited no comment.

Darwin had made his own evaluation of Florence as she supervised the serving of dinner, and decided that she was as healthy, vigorous, and straightforward a specimen of womanhood as he was likely to find in London. Imaginary ailments were as far from her life as the surface of the moon, and that made Jamie Murchison's earlier remarks all the less credible.

Across from Florence was Richard Crosse, who according to Murchison had visited her room but had seen and heard nothing out of place. Seated between an alderman and his wife, Crosse was a thin and intense young man in his middle twenties, slightly crook-backed and with one shoulder higher than the other. Somewhere in status between a paying lodger and a guest, he had kept his attention on his plate right through dinner. Only now did he turn dark, intelligent eyes towards Darwin.

At the end of the recital of the afternoon's events there was a respectful silence. "So you see," Darwin concluded. "There are five mysteries, with five questions to be answered. What thoughts do you have on any of this?"

There was another long silence. "Come now," said Faulkner. "Theories. What about you, Richard? You're always full of wild ideas, and the only time you pulled your nose out of your studies this week it was to tell me how excited you were about Dr. Darwin's visit. You must have something to offer."

Crosse shook his head, and glanced beseechingly between Faulkner and Darwin. "I—I'm afraid that I—"

"No one is *obliged* to provide comment." Darwin came to the rescue. "I told you, Joseph, that all I have to offer are questions. I look to others for answers."

At the end of the table, Mary Rawlings was frowning and scratching the end of her snub nose with her forefinger. "Would you entertain the idea not of an answer, but perhaps of a sixth mystery?"

"Gladly. Consideration of new questions often allows us to answer old ones."

"You never visited the exhibition, did you, and never saw the Heart of Ahura Mazda?"

Darwin shook his head.

"So you have been assuming that Daryush Sharani escaped from the locked hall in the same way as the would-be thief entered it, through an open window."

"That is true." Darwin was frowning. "It was my assumption, but it seems a reasonable one. On the evidence of witnesses he was certainly present at the exhibition when it closed, at three o'clock, and certainly absent when the watchman opened the doors."

"It would be a good assumption—if Daryush Sharani resembled other men in his appearance. But he did not." Mary Rawlings looked around the table for confirmation, and others nodded agreement. "He wore the most ornate and elaborate robes of scarlet and purple, and a tall red headdress. He also had a huge beard, big and black and bushy. There is no way that he could appear on the streets of London, even for two minutes, without being seen and remarked on by a score of people. Unless perhaps his clothes were found in the hall?"

"They were not." Darwin was looking at Mary Rawlings in admiration. "Young lady, *rem acu tetigisti*. You have put your finger on an absolutely crucial point. No clothes were found, nor the great ruby, the Heart of Ahura Mazda. Nor, for that matter, the day's takings from the exhibition, which were supposedly in excess of five pounds." The room fell silent. Everyone was looking at Darwin expectantly, while he had slumped dreamy-eyed in his chair and seemed half-asleep.

"So this man Sharani became *disembodied*?" said the alderman at last. "Went up into thin air?"

"I doubt that." Darwin roused himself and snapped his fingers. "Rather the opposite. Ah, what a fool I am! I did not have the sense to observe the results of my own actions." He turned to his host. "Joseph, do you have a carriage available?"

"Of course. But why? You cannot be leaving already, when it's not yet nine o'clock."

"I must." Darwin had stood up. "I must go back to the exhibition, to demonstrate to myself that I am indeed an imbecile—and would have remained one, but for the valuable assistance of this company. And anyone who cares to come with me will observe the evidence of my folly."

The afternoon's foggy damp had been succeeded by a hushed and relentless rain, enough to keep indoors anyone with no urgent reason to be abroad. The interior of the coach was drafty and wet, but Darwin was now in high spirits.

"The true disgrace is that I *noticed* it!" he said, as they clattered through empty streets towards the Thames. "And yet I did not apprehend its significance. When I was in the hall, I banged my stick on the stone floor, and remarked even then that the sound was strange. There was a boom to it, like an echo. I thought to myself, 'Rafters,' but the timbre was wrong. The echo was—under the floor."

Five of them were riding in the coach. Joseph Faulkner had not asked who else was going with Darwin—he was, and that was the main thing, for what might be an exciting adventure. Mary Rawlings had shown as much determination, grabbing Faulkner's arm so that he could not move without towing her along. The fourth in the coach was the alderman, Daniel Gambrill, who had climbed in despite his wife's nervous pleading with him not to go. He had guaranteed future domestic discord by leaving her to make her own way home as best she could. Last came Richard Crosse. He had swung aboard uninvited, sitting up next to the coachman and as jittery as ever. He leaned over to look inside the coach, appeared on the point of a flood of speech, and then suddenly sat upright again.

The rapid night ride took less than five minutes, and at the hall Darwin hustled on ahead of the others. He stood before the great double doors, lantern in hand, and cursed mildly.

"Ahriman's ghost! Padlocked again—when now there is nothing to steal." He turned to Richard Crosse. "You are more limber than I. The back window, then, and unbolt the side door."

Crosse melted away into the rain without a word. Thirty seconds later there was a rattle of bolts, and Darwin could stride on inside. He walked five paces, wiped his forehead with his sleeve, and held the lantern high. "Do you see it? What we seek, of course, is some way down through a solid stone floor."

It was Mary Rawlings who found it, over in one dark corner of the hall. The hinged wooden trap door had been painted grey and sanded over, so that it resembled stone flags. When it was lifted she hung back, nervous for the first time, but Darwin unhesitatingly swung the panel full open and peered down. He listened intently. A moment later he had laid the lantern on the floor and was descending into blackness.

"Pass the light down to me." His voice came back hollow and distant, added to a nearby sound of trickling water. "Then come yourselves."

Joseph Faulkner went first, with a caution appropriate to his

age. When the others followed, with Alderman Gambrill firmly in tailguard position, they found themselves standing on a long wet ledge about five yards wide. Beyond it, black and restless, flowed a stream of twice the width.

"It's a river," said Mary. "A real underground river!"

"It is." Darwin was staring around with vast satisfaction. "And it should be no surprise to us. London is ancient. We tend to forget the obvious, but this city, too, was once no more than woods and meadows. Most of the old streams run now below the surface, invisible and out of mind. And this must be one of them."

"By Dolly, you are right, sir," said Gambrill. He was looking around him, mouth open. "And you shame a Londoner native-born. I knew this from my childhood. There were four old rivers on the north shore, the Walbrook, the Fleet, the Tyburn, and the Westbourne. Unless my memory serves me false, this must be a spur of the old Walbrook. The main river rose in Finsbury, and ran close by the Mansion House. It joined the Thames by Dowgate, but I've heard no mention of it for years."

"But what are you seeking here?" Mary stepped close to the lip of the stream, peering over the worn stone edge at the water. "Is it that?"

She was pointing down. In the moving water, firmly supported by metal braces from the stony edge, sat a new structure. It was a miniature water wheel, and it was turning steadily under pressure of the flow.

"That will do excellently well for a beginning." Darwin hunched low, and examined the wheel's construction. "Skillfully made," he said after a moment. "And recently set in place. There is a flow from the river, but I think temporal variation comes from tidal changes. Now then. Here things become more interesting." He was moving with the lantern, following a pair of long black lines that ran from the wheel's center, into a complex tangle of broken gears and wheels, then finally appeared again to run across to and up the slippery wall. He bent low, and scraped at the surface of one of the lines with his thumbnail. There was a glint of metal beneath.

"Where do they lead?" said Faulkner. Mary Rawlings was holding his arm, in real or simulated nervousness, and the older man was enjoying the whole experience. "What's above there? It must be part of the hall itself."

"It is." Darwin followed the lines up with the lantern's beam, until they disappeared into the ceiling. "We are exactly beneath

the pedestal. If it were present, the Heart of Ahura Mazda would stand right above us."

"But where's the Guardian?" said Mary. "Weren't you expecting to see Sharani here?"

"I was *hoping* to do so. I was not *expecting* it." Darwin ventured along the stony side of the underground stream, leading the way quietly through dark and filthy culverts. Water dripped steadily onto their heads from dark wooden beams and brick arches, the latter furred over with mildew and patches of grey fungus. All the while, the rain-fed stream murmured along no more than a yard from their feet.

"Aha." Darwin paused, half a dozen paces ahead of the rest. "Something new. Bring the other light, Joseph, and let's take a close look."

He had reached a forlorn heap of garments, bright scarlets and purples dulled by lantern light. Beyond them, the stream branched into three smaller tributaries.

Darwin lifted a glittering robe and turban. "The servant of Ahura Mazda. Vanished, as our friend Mr. Gambrell suspected, at this very point." As he spoke, a cold air blew through the tunnel, rippling the cloth in his hand.

The alderman gave a little grunt, and retreated a step. "Disembodied. Then we can follow him no further with human agents?" His voice hovered between hope and disappointment.

"We cannot," said Darwin cheerfully. "However, that does not mean he cannot be followed by inhuman ones. Friend Daryush Sharani has made a most serious mistake. He should have thrown his outer garments into the river, rather than leaving them here. Don't touch the rest of these clothes." He turned to Faulkner. "Joseph, we require assistance. Can you find me a pair of blood-hounds?"

"At this hour? Erasmus, you certainly ask a lot of me." But Faulkner sounded delighted, and after a moment he turned to Crosse. "Richard, you know Tom Triddler's place, up past the Mansion House. Would you go there, and ask him for a pair of his best tracking hounds? Tell him it's for me. You'll have to bang on his door for a while, because he's half deaf. But keep hammering. He'll come."

Crosse hesitated, turning his head to one side and opening and closing his mouth. Finally he nodded and hurried away without speaking into the darkness.

"I just don't know what's got into Richard tonight," said Faulkner. "He's behaving very oddly. Maybe he's in love."

"He is certainly that," said Darwin. "With Miss Florence Trustrum. He regards her with the hopeless yearning of a mortal for a goddess. Knowing your own fascination for such things, I am only astonished that you did not see it long ago."

He walked slowly back along the tunnel to the place they had entered, and squatted down on the wet stone. And there, as unconcerned as though he sat in Faulkner's warm parlor, he began to examine in detail the mass of gears, wheels, wires, and pulleys that sat directly beneath the pedestal in the Exhibition Hall.

"Broken," he said after a few minutes. He held up a handful of components. "Quite deliberately, and beyond repair. I conjecture that several elements have been also removed. Without a few hints from its maker, its purpose is hard to divine."

"Never mind that old junk." Alderman Gambrill had been looking forward to excitement, not standing around in a damp sewer. "Are you really expecting a dog to be able to track down here, in the cold and dark? Tracking dogs need light and air."

"No, sir." Darwin raised himself laboriously to his feet. "That is an old wives' tale. A good tracking dog will follow a scent as well at night as during the day, as well for a non-living scent as for a living spoor, and as well underground as on the surface. If we are looking for mysteries tonight, we will find none greater than a hound's nose. It possesses subtleties for distinction of odors that we can scarcely imagine. How many centuries will it be, do you think, before mankind will produce a machine to rival the nose of the dog for sensitivity and discernment?"

"Well." Alderman Gambrill sounded unpersuaded. "I'd always been told that if you took a tracking hound in a dark, airless place—"

He was interrupted by a cry from above, and a sound of clattering footsteps on the stones overhead.

"Here they come," said Darwin. "And now perhaps we can observe one of the wonders of Nature."

Richard Crosse came down the ladder first, carrying a mournful-looking black hound with jowls and ears that hung down below its lower jaw. After him came a rumped mah carrying a second dog.

"Late work, Tom Triddler," said Faulkner cheerfully. He rubbed his hands. "No matter, we'll see you're well rewarded for it. Good trackers, are they?"

"Best I have, sir." Triddler put down the dog and swept off his

cap, to reveal a totally bald head. He put the cap on again hurriedly. "Cold down here."

"But that will not interfere with the hounds?" Darwin looked worried.

"No, sir. Nothing does. Not cold, not dark, not nothing."

Darwin nodded at Alderman Gambrill. "You will see that your concerns were groundless." He turned to Tom Triddler. "Are we ready to begin?"

"I am, and the dogs are." Triddler stared around him. "What an 'ole. Wouldn't like to come courting down 'ere. Got a scent for the dogs, 'ave yer? Old sock, somethin' like that."

"This way." Darwin led the way to the heap of discarded clothing. "Any one of these should do it."

"Aye. Perfec'." Triddler led the two hounds to the pile and pointed to it. The dogs snuffled and wagged their tails furiously, while all the people clustered round them. "They've got it now—an' off we go. Go on, now, Blister. An' you, Billy, on yer way."

He was holding the two leashes lightly, while the dogs sniffed and snuffled. "Go on, now," he repeated. "We're waitin'. We don't 'ave all night."

His second call was very necessary. The two dogs had turned round once, then settled on their bellies on the floor, tails wagging happily. But when Tom Triddler shouted them again into action, they sank to rest their jaws on the cold stone. Their tails drooped, and they stared at him with mournful eyes.

After another few attempts to spur them on, he shook his head. "I've never seen anythin' like it, Mr. Faulkner. They won't move. Not an inch. They don't like it 'ere underground."

"And they're quite right." Daniel Gambrill actually looked pleased by the failure. He gave Darwin a nod of I-told-you-so, and began to retreat towards the ladder. "I have no wish to be insulting to anyone here, but I suggest that tonight canine wisdom has proved superior. It's cold down here, and it's unpleasant. As you say, Dr. Darwin, dogs possess powers that we lack. They know we'll find nothing more. I'm going home."

"Powers that we have *lost*," muttered Darwin, but his tone lacked its usual conviction. In his disconsolate manner, he was a match for the two bloodhounds. "I was quite convinced . . . but you are right, alderman. We will accomplish nothing more tonight. Might as well to bed."

He limped after Gambrill towards the ladder, so rumbled and so woebegone that Joseph Faulkner called after him:

"Come now, 'Rasmus. There's always tomorrow."

"Aye," came the testy reply over Darwin's shoulder. "Another day to make a fool of myself."

"Ah," said Faulkner softly to Mary Rawlings. "That's not our Dr. Darwin, founder of the Lunar Society and Europe's leading physician. That's gout speaking. Come along, my dear, let's be out of here. There are more pleasant nighttime pursuits than underground sewer wandering. And in the morning you will see a new Erasmus."

But the morning came to a city immobilized. During the night, the rain had frozen and then turned to snow. A deadly sheath lay on every flat surface, from east of the Tower to a mile past Westminster. A few hardy (or foolhardy) merchants had ventured forth, their draft horses skidding and shivering on treacherous roads, and after a hundred yards retreated. By eleven the whole city was again shrouded and quiet.

Darwin sat in his own room at Faulkner's house, chafing with impatience. The revelation had come during the night. There *was* a way to trace Daryush Sharani, and a sure one—if only Darwin could pursue it. But his weight and his gout together conspired against him.

Finally he went down to Florence Trustrum's room on the ground floor, and asked her to deliver a letter to Jamie Murchison. She muffled herself in wool head shawl, thick overcoat, and ugly leather boots, and set out into the white wilderness. Darwin sat at the window, counted the seagulls perched on the gable roof, and wondered at the instinct that sent them flying far inland when the northeasters blew in with their winter storms.

Florence returned breathless in a quarter of an hour. Her face was flushed. "Jamie will do it this morning," she said.

"You are upset." Darwin took her by the hand. "What happened?"

"It was . . . nothing." She gave him a direct glance from bright blue eyes. "Oh, why not. I'll tell you. Jamie—he asked me to marry him."

"Ah. And you said?"

"I told him—that I did not know." She was gone, leaving the smell of warm wet wool behind her. Darwin nodded to himself, and went back to watching seagulls.

It was noon before Murchison arrived. Joseph Faulkner, Mary Rawlings, Florence Trustrum, and Darwin were again in the dining room, enjoying a quiet lunch together of cold pork, apple sauce,

sage and onion stuffing, and hot boiled carrots. Darwin had left instructions to the staff, and Murchison was shown at once into the dining room, snowy boots and all. He hesitated on the threshold.

"You have it?" said Darwin eagerly.

"I do. I went to the chandler's as soon as I received your message."

"And you found an address?"

"I did."

"And it is . . . ?"

Murchison looked at Joseph Faulkner, gulped, and stammered: "They gave me an address for the delivery of just the goods that you listed. But it was here!—this very house!"

"What!" Darwin stared at Faulkner, who shook his head. "No good looking at me, 'Rasmus—I have no idea what you two are talking about."

"This house." Darwin subsided into his chair. After a few seconds of open-mouthed gawping at his empty plate, he closed his eyes and breathed a vast sigh. "It is so. And at last I see everything." He stood up. "Come on. All of you."

With the other four trailing along behind, Darwin headed for the ground floor at the rear of the house. At a closed door he knocked and went straight in.

"But this is Richard's room," said Florence.

"Aye. But Mr. Crosse is fortunately *in absentia* at the moment. So let us see." Darwin had moved to the writing desk by the window and was coolly opening drawers and examining their contents.

"Erasmus, this is a little too much." Joseph Faulkner moved to Darwin's side. "Richard is from an old Somerset family that I well respect, and I think of him as my guest. To see his room commandeered in such a way, and his private belongings despoiled—"

He paused. Darwin had reached deep into a left-hand drawer of the *escritoire* and pulled out a large, glittering stone.

"The Heart of Ahura Mazda." He brought it close to his face, then turned it to allow its facets to catch the light from the window. "But no priceless ruby. Unless my judgment is a thing of the past, what we have here is nothing more than high-quality glass. And most cunningly cut, I must admit."

He plunged again into the drawer. "And now a part of the Guardian himself. His beard." In his hand was a tangle of hair, thick and black and bushy. "And as for the *rest* of Daryush Sharani . . ."

Darwin looked past Faulkner and the others. "Come in, sir, and claim your possessions. My behavior here leaves much to be excused."

In the doorway, face ashen, stood Richard Crosse. The dusting of snow on the shoulders of his black coat matched his countenance. At Darwin's gesture he moved forward and sank down to sit on the narrow bed.

Darwin stared at him for a moment, and his expression changed. "When did you last have food and drink?"

Crosse shook his head. "Last night? This morning? Sir, I am not sure."

"This must not be." Darwin went to Crosse and gestured to Mary Rawlings to support him on the other side. "We will go to the dining room, sir, and you will eat and drink. I will advance hypotheses, and you will correct me as you choose. Silence, now—I neither need nor expect an answer. Speak if you must. But above all, you must eat. Remember the natural law of the world, Mr. Crosse. Eat, or be eaten!"

It was an odd little procession. Joseph Faulkner and Florence Trustrum led the way, he looking back over his shoulder all the time. Next came Darwin and Mary Rawlings, supporting Crosse between them. He walked like a zombie, without volition or resistance. Last came Jamie Murchison, stolid young face scowling in puzzlement. At the door to the dining room, Crosse at last lifted his head and stared straight at Darwin.

"How did you *know*? How could you possibly know?"

"I know only part. I suspect more. And on one central element, I am so ignorant that I scarce know what to ask you." Darwin steered Crosse to the table and nodded at Florence to fill a plate with roast pork and carrots and a glass with a mixture of beer and brandy. "But I know where to begin. It is to assure you, Richard Crosse, that I know of no law that you have broken. Not one. You are as innocent as Mr. Faulkner himself."

Darwin caught the quick cross-look between Joseph Faulkner and Mary. "In a *legal* sense," he went on, one eye on Faulkner, "you are blameless, Mr. Crosse. In a *moral* sense, things are more complex. You sought to obtain assistance for a dying man when many would have thought only of flight. But I must accuse you of a universal failing—what we all do, all too often: of wishing to prove our own cleverness and importance to the world."

Crosse bowed his head in assent, and after another unhappy look at Darwin picked up a fork and began to eat.

"And I am as guilty of that as anyone," went on Darwin. "Do you know where my own thoughts began on this matter? In as self-centered and introspective a place as one could dream of. I asked

myself, who knew that I, Erasmus Darwin, was at the Boar's Head Tavern yesterday afternoon? For only someone with that knowledge could seek to summon me to the exhibition."

Florence, with excellent instinct, had placed another piled plate of food in front of Darwin. He began to eat with his fingers, his eyes never leaving Richard Crosse.

"Let us define that group," he went on, with his mouth full. "Joseph certainly knew, and presumably Mary knew. Jamie Murchison knew, since he was there—but he was also with me when the message came, which struck him from the list of candidates who might have sent for me. Who else? It seemed that there might be half a dozen others, but they must all be people *close to Joseph Faulkner*. Only they could know that he and I were meeting at the Boar's Head during the afternoon. So. The possible universe was circumscribed. But I could go no further with logic alone, to point a finger at one man or woman. Something new was needed, and that something I hoped to find when we returned to the Exhibition Hall last night. At first, I thought I had discovered it. The garments of Daryush Sharani were my guide, they would allow us to follow him. But the hounds proved useless. I returned to this house, as baffled as I have ever been in my life." Darwin glanced up at Faulkner. "Alderman Gambrell was already planting doubts in our minds in suggesting that the hounds would prove useless at night and underground."

Faulkner shrugged. "He was right. They were useless. They told us nothing."

"That is because we asked the wrong question. A dog can answer only in a dog's terms. Remember when Tom Triddler released the hounds? They sniffed at the clothing, and wagged their tails, and were all excitement. It was only when he shouted at them again, and told them to hunt for the scent, that they lost all enthusiasm. As well they might! They had done their job, and they knew it. They did not deserve harsh words from their master. The source of the scent of the garments was right there—in his person." Darwin pointed at Richard Crosse. "The hounds knew it, and told us all that they could tell. Was it their fault that we were unable to read the message?"

"But *why*?" Mary Rawlings was unable to contain herself. "What is the point of all this flummery? Rubies, and curses, and fancy dress, and deception. Dr. Darwin, say what you will—but a man *died* at the exhibition. Are you forgetting or dismissing that?"

"Neither." Darwin licked his fingers, and nodded across the table

at Crosse. "Sir, I could make my estimate of the whole course of events. But at this point, I think you ought to make your statement. Remember, I am not the magistrate—but he will be here, if we find it necessary to call for him. Forget your reticence, and speak. Let me say only this. After I examined the contrivance in the river vault beneath the exhibition, I suspected that the unusual material for its construction would have been purchased from a local chandler. We have confirmation of that; your own name I am sure is to be found on the receipts."

Richard Crosse laid down knife and fork and stared around the table. He bit his lip. "I will tell. But after yesterday's disastrous events, I pledged my own soul to make no public revelation of one element of this affair. For all the rest, Dr. Darwin, you have said it for me. I wanted to prove my own cleverness, by a successful hoax on the whole world. You see, I had the means to do it—a method of my own devising that would hold a grown man helpless, without harming him."

"A *well* man," said Darwin. "But for a man already suffering from degenerative heart disease, like the would-be thief . . ."

"I know that now—too late." Crosse rubbed at his gaunt jaw. "I thought I had a harmless hoax. I would fool all this great city with the Heart of Ahura Mazda, and with the great 'exhibition' of the stone. And then Daryush Sharani would disappear forever. I never intended to boast of my success, or to tell of the hoax. But I was the fool."

"And you were taking people's money," said Mary Rawlings softly.

He nodded at her. "I was. But never with thought of real gain. It was a small amount, and they seemed well pleased with what they saw. And my family is well-to-do. If the weather had not turned so foul today, I would be on my way home to Fyne Court, in Somerset. I intended to say no more than that I was tired of life in London, and preferred the quiet of the Quantock Hills."

"But the Earl of Marbury," said Faulkner. "And the other men who were made helpless by your 'demon.' What of them? I can accept the facts of your imposture, and your disguise as Daryush Sharani. We are all familiar with elaborate robes and false beards. But you have said nothing to explain the true mysteries; how the earl was made to cooperate with you, or how the man died yesterday when he attempted to touch the Heart of Ahura Mazda. That is what I want to hear."

Richard Crosse looked down at the tablecloth and shook his head.

"I have promised myself that I will never speak of that. If I were able to forget it myself, I would do so."

"Then we'll have the magistrate in, and the devil with it." Faulkner slapped his hand down on the table. "Without the rest, what you have said is no explanation at all."

Crosse did not look up. "So be it," he said at last. But Darwin was holding up a hand greasy with pork fat. "One moment, Joseph, before we rush to the law and the clumsy clutch of official justice. Mr. Crosse, I do not ask you to speak, or go beyond your own conscience. But I do ask you to come with me, and listen to what I have to say. And you, Joseph, are welcome if you promise to remain silent on what you hear."

"You're a guest in my house, 'Rasmus, and you swear me to silence!" But Faulkner was already on his feet. He led Darwin and Crosse out, turning as he left to say, "Florence, this is the day for hot chocolate. Order for yourselves, would you, and have a pot brought through to us. A big one."

The paneled study across the entrance hall was unheated, and cold enough for frost patterns to sit on the inside of the window panes. Faulkner shivered, gestured to the armchairs, and sat down hard himself on a stuffed ottoman. "Should I have the fire lit in here, Erasmus?"

"I think not. This will be brief."

Faulkner rubbed his hands together. "Speak, then, before we all freeze."

"Without delay." Darwin turned to Richard Crosse. "I begin with a statement that might be considered more as personal opinion than fact. To men of inquiring minds, few elements of today's natural philosophy excite so much interest as the experiments of Van Musschenbroek of Leyden, Von Kleist of Pomerania, Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, and of our own Jesse Ramsden. Would you not agree?"

"You know all!" Crosse's face went even paler, and his dark eyes widened.

"Far from it. I know little, and must guess a great deal. But let me imagine a tale for you. Suppose that we have a young man, one of feverish imagination and genuine inventive powers, who reads of the works I mentioned, and becomes fascinated with the whole field of *electricity*. He reads Mr. Franklin's great work *Experiments and Observations*, and Mr. Joseph Priestley's encyclopedic *History of Electricity*. And his own imagination is, to employ an appropriate term, sparked. He has original ideas. He begins to experiment

himself—but secretly, because he is still unsure of where his own notions will lead him.”

“Dr. Darwin, you are a wizard! How can you know these things?”

“He’s right, ‘Rasmus—how the devil do you know?”

“I do not know. But events in this house give sufficient reason for conjecture. Observe.” Darwin leaned across to the desk and picked up an amber paperweight. He rubbed it hard against his own rough jacket, then held it out towards one of Joseph Faulkner’s fur caps, perched on the arm of a chair. “See how the fur moves, to set each of its hairs separate from its neighbors. It is the oldest electric effect, already well-known to the old Greeks—our very word, ‘electricity,’ comes from it. When I heard that Florence Trustrum had reported her own hair standing separate on arms and head, and odd sensations on her skin, *within this very house*, my thoughts turned idly to Leyden jars, and to electric sparkings. But I dismissed the idea as an irrelevance, and my musings went no further at the time. Then last night I saw the underground vault, and within it the diverse but mysterious *apparati* of some electrical experimenter, copper wires and bars of iron and plates of lead. Yet still I made no connection. Only today, with the chandler’s report of material delivered to this very place, did my brain begin to work. I recalled the smell of the Exhibition Hall when I arrived there—the very air itself held the whiff of electrical discharge. And at last, I could offer a rational explanation of the hounds’ failure—or rather, to be fair to them, of their success. But who would have suspected it, that Daryush Sharani was last night one of our very company.”

“You would.” Richard Crosse had recovered his composure. With his secret revealed, a more thoughtful, fatalistic man had emerged. “Your every suggestion is precisely right. So now I ask, knowing all, what do you want of me?”

“Knowing all?” Darwin started up in his chair. “Why, man, I know nothing of the most fascinating subject: what is your machine, that could render a would-be thief totally helpless, and how does it work? That’s what I want to know; not the details of glass rubies, stage magic, or deception.”

Crosse averted his eyes. “I have sworn to myself not to reveal that. It has done enough damage already. If it were ever to be broadcast . . .”

“It would not be.” Darwin was wriggling in his seat with excitement. “Not by me, and not by Joseph. I swear, what you tell

us will go no further—on that you have my oath as a physician and a human.”

“And you, Mr. Faulkner?”

“Well, I suppose . . .” Faulkner glared at Darwin. “Damn it, Rasmus, don’t you think I ought to be allowed to make up my own mind? To find out what’s going on here, I know you’d be quite happy to pawn my soul.” He turned to Crosse. “All right, Richard. It shall be as Dr. Darwin says, anything you tell us will never be breathed to another mortal. Though I’m as sure as a pig’s tail curls that I’ll understand not two words of your explanation.”

“It is elementary, and yet at the same time mysterious.” Crosse went to the desk and took paper, pen, and inkwell. “I have results, but no sound basis for a scientific explanation. A turning wheel, like the water wheel that we looked at last night, bearing magnets both fixed and moving, will produce a flow of electricity in loops of wire—the long copper lines that you both saw beneath the Exhibition Hall. And that flow, passed through other coils that I took out of the machine and threw into the river, becomes a force strong enough to bind a man immobile. I attached one wire to the metal plate around the pedestal holding the Heart of Ahura Mazda, and one to the metal rim of the protecting glass case, in such a way that I could disconnect it from the side of the pedestal itself. Thus.” He sketched a series of simple diagrams in black ink, labeling each one as he did so. His trembling hands grew steady as he worked. “I assure you, sir, I had tested this machine a hundred times on myself. It freezes the subject, so that free movement is impossible, but when the flow ceases there are no harmful after-effects, merely a tingling like pins and needles.”

“And that is what you did to the Earl of Marbury?” Darwin was peering at the sheet, eyes alight.

“Exactly that—with no ill result at all, to him or to anyone else who tried. It seemed a perfect device for protecting the Heart of Ahura Mazda, the word of which would quickly spread all around London and assure the total success of the hoax. As soon as that game was over, I intended to explore the electrical effects I had discovered until I understood their deepest meaning. But after the death of the thief yesterday . . .” The face of Richard Crosse had been filled with life and energy when he talked of his work. Now it clouded.

“I cannot explain why it proved fatal,” said Darwin. “But I can suggest several avenues of thought that should be followed. The

thief was wearing shoes that were broken and wet, and as we know, damp increases electric flow. More important, I suspect, was yesterday's thaw-fed condition of the underground river. If the rate at which the water wheel turns dictates the level of the shock received by the pedestal, our wretched thief may have received an impulse many times what you found in your earlier experiments. Enough to blister his hand, and enough to provide a fatal jolt to a weak heart."

"Your suggestions are ingenious, sir. But I will never again pursue such reckless follies." Crosse fell silent and hung his head as Florence Trustrum came into the room carrying cups, saucers, and a large silver pot of hot chocolate. He looked up only to give her a quick smile of thanks as she placed the tray at his side.

"What are you going to do with me?" he said, after she had left the room without a word. "You are right. I did not check sufficiently the natural variations in the electric force. A man is dead who should be alive."

Darwin raised his eyebrows and glanced across at Faulkner. "Joseph?"

"Me?" Faulkner picked up the fur cap and placed it on his head. "Me? Why, damn it, I'm not going to do anything at all. If a thief is dead who should have been arrested, it's time saved for the hangman. And it's no concern of mine if the honorable citizens of London Town flock to see a hoax. From all I can see, they feel they got their money's worth. I don't want you practicing your thaumaturgical exploits any more in this house—even though you and 'Rasmus call it science—but for the rest, you are still welcome to stay here."

"Thank you, sir, but I must go back to Somerset." Crosse gave the closed door a long and unhappy look. "I should go at once."

"If that is your decision," said Darwin. "But if you, Joseph, will permit it, I would like one private word with Mr. Crosse. Alone—and nothing, I assure you, to do with electricity."

"And thank the Lord for that." Faulkner stood up and moved briskly to the door. "I said I would not understand a word of your technical talk, and I was right. Does *anybody* understand this thing called electricity?"

Darwin and Crosse looked at each other, and both shook their heads.

"We do not, Joseph," said Darwin. He was smiling. "Not yet. For it is as your great countryman, Mr. Franklin, puts it so well in one of his letters. 'If there is no other purpose for the electricity than

this, it may serve to make a vain man humble.' ”

He waited until Faulkner was outside, and the door closed, before he turned again to the waiting Crosse. “My previous inquiries of you were motivated by scientific curiosity. What I say now has no such origins, and you may choose to regard it as an unwarranted and unconscionable intrusion in your private affairs.”

Crosse was quietly tearing to pieces the diagrams he had drawn of his equipment. “Continue, sir,” he said. “I have at least been provided with fair warning.”

“Very well, then. The subject is Florence Trustrum. You look on her with favor?”

“It is so obvious?” Richard Crosse’s voice was bitter. “I did, and more than favor. But as you see, I am not made to—to ‘court an amorous looking-glass.’ ” His hand went to his left shoulder.

Darwin snorted. “And yet your namesake, Richard, that you now choose to quote, ascended to the throne of England, and wed the woman of his choice. Stop your self-pity. You are as whole a man as any in this house, if you think yourself so.”

“I cannot think that thought. I will be returning to Somerset as soon as the weather permits—if I am free to do so?”

“You are free. But I urge you not to go. You should stay here, and determine if Florence feels an equal warmth for you.”

“She has no need for me. A new suitor is already here—you saw him.”

“I did. Mr. Murchison is a fine young man, and probably an honest and honorable one. I wish him no hurt, and I should not be taking sides. But let me say this: the world is full of pleasant, handsome men, as harmless and as simple-minded as Jamie Murchison. You are different. You have the rarest gift, the one that marks our transition to a higher being. You have *creativity*; an inspired inventiveness coupled with true scientific instinct.”

“A creativity that kills. Dr. Darwin, I am flattered, I cannot deny it. But there are others far more ingenious than I.”

“No, sir.” Darwin spoke with great firmness. “There are all too few of them, in any time and place. London today does not contain five such men and women. If you do not pursue the great problems you alone can see, who will pursue them? Me, or Mr. Faulkner, or Miss Rawlings, or Mr. Murchison? Never. We may have the desire, but we lack the divine touch. Perhaps you think that your own children will do what you will not? But only if they exist. You, and people like you, have a duty to the world: you must marry, and love, and propagate.”

Richard Crosse removed his hand from his left shoulder and stared quizzically at Darwin. "Yet you are single, sir."

The older man paused. It was many seconds before he answered. "Aye. For now, but not, I think, forever. I have children already from a former marriage. However, you make an excellent point. I should be truer to my own principles. I will remember that."

Darwin stood up, patted Crosse's shoulder, and walked across to the door. He turned back on the threshold. "I will join the others now. Florence Trustrum will be back here in a few minutes, to collect the cups and the chocolate. Say to her what you will. But say it."

"Sir, one moment." Crosse hurried to Darwin at the door, pale face suddenly resolute. "I will try, surely I will try. But you should know that I have no gift for honeyed words. I have tried ten times to tell Florence how I feel, and each time I have failed."

"Then, Richard, you must try an eleventh time." Darwin smiled his gap-toothed smile. "Courage, man. Nature leaves no space in the world for failures. You can win. See here." Darwin reached into his pocket, and pulled out a glittering chunk of red glass. "There is your own creation, the Heart of Ahura Mazda. Surely the man who could conceive this can win a heart to replace it."

Now Darwin closed the door, turned, and headed towards the rear of the house. He walked without noticing where he was going, absorbed by a new and intriguing thought. If Richard Crosse did not try again and did not win, why then that very failure made him unfit to sire descendants. And the same idea could be applied to every field of activity, for animals as much as for men. A grand principle was at work here, Nature forming what it needed for future generations, by an inevitable weeding of the present. It was happening now, and it had happened always.

Erasmus Darwin walked on, right past the room where the others were waiting for him. The smell of fresh-baked bread drew him by instinct toward the kitchen, but his mind strayed far away. Already he was wondering how these new thoughts could be framed in their most general form.

*"... that eager mind, whom fools deride
For laced and periwigged verses on his flowers;
Forgetting how he strode before his age,
And how his grandson caught from his right hand
A fire that lit the world."*

—ALFRED NOYES.

UNSOLVED

by
Randall L. Whipkey

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the December issue.

As an extra treat for trick-or-treaters this past Halloween, the five couples who live on one side of one block of Summerset Street—their houses, from one end of the block to the other, are numbered 101, 103, 105, 107, and 109—dressed up in costumes and decorated their foyers, each couple choosing a different theme. From the clues below, can you deduce the full names of each couple (one woman is Monica), their house number, and the theme each used?

1. The Drakes' theme was neither "Dracula's Castle" nor "Ye Olde Graveyarde."
2. Larry and Linda are not husband and wife.
3. Mike's house is between Nora's and that of the couple whose theme was "Ye Olde Graveyarde."
4. John isn't Mr. Drake.
5. The Colemans live next door to Linda and her husband.
6. Kevin's house is between those of Mr. and Mrs. English and the couple whose theme was "Dracula's Castle," neither of whose address is 101.
7. Mr. and Mrs. Bowers live next door to the couple whose theme was "Invaders from Space."
8. Neither John and his wife nor Larry and his had "Ye Olde Graveyarde" as a theme.
9. Nick's house is between those of Kristi and her husband and the Drakes, neither of whom lives at Number 103.
10. Nora and her husband don't live at Number 109.
11. Mike's wife isn't Kristi.
12. Kristi isn't Mrs. Coleman.
13. The Colemans' theme wasn't "Invaders from Space."
14. The Austins live next door to the couple whose theme was "African Safari."
15. Joan and her husband did not choose "The Ghost House" as their theme.
16. Linda isn't Mrs. English.

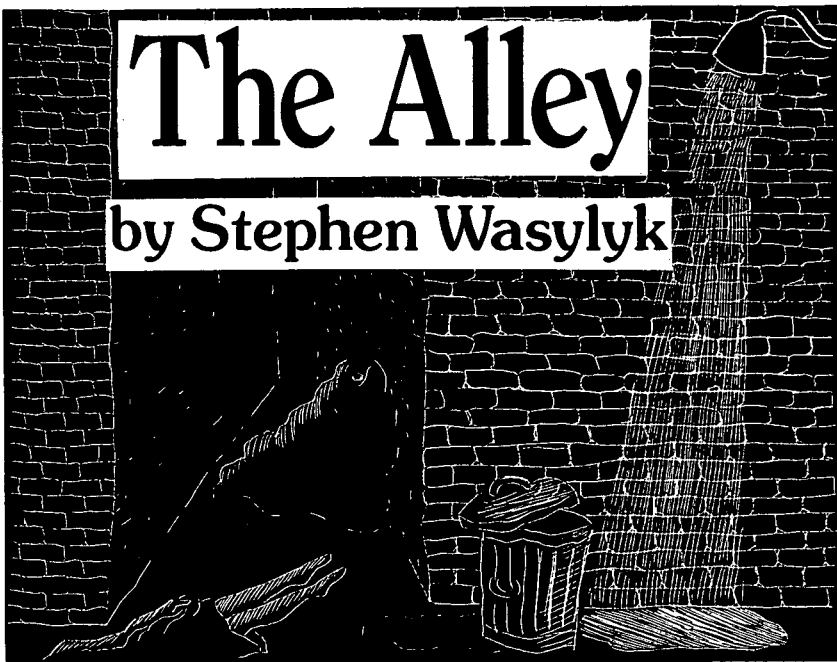
See page 138 for the solution to the October puzzle.

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The Alley

by Stephen Wasylyk



At two thirty in the morning, the street was deserted except for the stooped, bearded figure of Gopher George shuffling along the sidewalk, shapeless hat jammed low and bagged possessions clutched to his chest, moving through the pools of yellow beneath the street lights and the shadows between them like an animated bundle of old clothing.

The tall man hadn't tried to stop him from leaving the shelter, the way people used to do at The Place They Had Sent Him. Walls of any kind made

him uneasy, barriers that prevented him from meeting someone waiting, even though he couldn't remember who. Or where.

The glaring headlights and approaching growl of a sedan shrank him against a brick wall, a thin memory of fear and pain freezing him momentarily and making his head hurt before he resumed his early morning trek.

At a dark gash separating two buildings, he peered cautiously around the corner.

One block long, cobblestoned and sloping slightly toward the

center, the narrow alley had been there since boisterous sailors had swarmed from sailing ships at the river docks three squares away, looking for excitement after months at sea. A narrow connection between two north and south streets, it was denied the sun during the day and cut off from street lights at night by the surrounding buildings, its perpetual shadow and darkness a magnet for death and violence through the years.

Gopher George knew nothing of that and wouldn't have cared if he did. Poised to run, he stared into the darkness.

Hearing nothing and sensing nothing, he shuffled up the alley. At a recess in one of the buildings just deep enough to keep him out of the wind and to shelter him from the rain, he snuggled down between two large sheets of cardboard he kept there. The mound he created appeared to be no more than a discarded carton. Only his hat and eyes protruded, like the head of a cautious animal peeking from its burrow and ready to be withdrawn at a hint of danger, which was why the young patrolman who had first picked him up had named him Gopher George.

Cardboard insulating him against the dampness that glistened on the cobblestones, Gopher George slept, dreaming

dreams that weren't dreams at all but ragged patches of nightmares frayed by confusion, pain, and terror.

In her dark apartment three stories above, Mattie sat near the window, short heavy frame entrapped in a soft chair, edema-puffed ankles propped on a pillowed footstool. All she could see was a sliver of the lighted street. It was enough. Though lonely and deserted, it was still a piece of a world where she had once played a part.

She sipped at a glass of cheap wine cradled in her hands.

Sleep. No point in sleeping unless you had something to do or somewhere to go the next day. She had nothing. Those three flights of stairs now exacted too high a price to pay for the warmth of the sun and the company of the others in the small park down the street. Funny. Like a soldier in combat, she had seen it happen to others but had never imagined she would be a victim.

"Where's Mattie? I haven't seen her lately."

"Don't you know? She just can't make it any more."

Just can't make it any more. She sipped the wine and leaned forward to massage her aching legs. Spend thirty-five years on your feet serving customers in a department store and you pay a penalty.

The massage did no good. It never did. Thank God for Kate Felson down the hall, who didn't mind picking up her groceries now and then. If it hadn't been for her, she'd have to negotiate those stairs more often than she did.

If Kate moved—

To hell with it. The day might come when she'd have to go up and down those stairs on her hands and knees like a baby, but by God, if that was what it took, she'd do it. That was life. You started out helpless and ended the same way.

In the darkness, a radio talk show host and his caller argued the pros and cons of a small war somewhere and whether the country should be spending millions to help one side or the other.

She turned them off.

People were always trying to save the world by killing each other. My system is better than your system. *Boom*. My God is better than your God. *Boom*. Who the hell cared? They'd been doing it long before she arrived and would be at it long after she'd gone.

Damn the broken television, anyway. Those old late-night movies not only brought people into the room, but took her back to when she was young.

She sipped the wine and smiled. She'd danced her way through those years with the

best of them until Townsend came along.

Headlights flashed against a brick wall as a car turned into the alley. Strange.

She pressed her face close to the screen in the window.

The car stopped below her; a big car, a long car. The lights went out although she could hear the engine still running.

The dark shape of a man came to the rear. When he opened the trunk, a dim light gleamed for an instant on slim white legs and then the trunk slammed shut and the car was gone, leaving a dark mound on the cobblestones.

The car awakened Gopher George. For a moment, he thought it was a monster come to destroy him. He shrank in terror, fearful eyes showing above the cardboard, watching as the man dumped the body. Almost invisible in the darkness, the awkwardly sprawled shape remained after the car had gone, and Gopher George, grateful the monster had left, wasn't sure whether it was real or just another dream. He slipped back into another of his never ending nightmares.

The dark bundle in the center of the alley was no dream to Mattie. She knew exactly what it was. Heart racing and horror clogging her throat, she

straightened from the window and gulped the rest of the wine. What she didn't know was what to do about it. The last time her bill had gone up, she'd angrily told them to take her phone out. She had no one to call anyway.

Kate had a phone, but Lord, it was three in the morning, and she couldn't wake her at that hour. The poor woman had to be up at five.

She pressed close to the screen again, half hoping the bundle had mysteriously disappeared, but it hadn't moved. It was a woman. The brief gleam of those white thighs had told her that.

Suppose she wasn't dead? Suppose they could still save her? How long before someone else saw that bundle of blackness in the alley? Dawn. By then it would certainly be too late, and it would be her fault. Mattie's fault. Honest, true-blue, good citizen, vote-every-election Mattie.

Damn. Why me, Lord?

She flicked on the light and shuffled heavily across the room, a heavy woman in a worn robe with life running out but determined not to go without a fight.

DeShay stepped back from the body to let Hume take over. His partner hadn't seen as many as he had and needed the experience.

The girl wasn't much younger than his daughter, another of

those kids on the streets selling themselves. No identification, but someone in vice might recognize her. Might. The kids came and went like shadows, their sixteen or seventeen years of existence no more than a blip.

Explain, yell, show them statistics, but they all believed it would never happen to them. But it did, and it always would. The ability to separate good from evil was not inherent but born of time and they'd had too little of that.

He motioned the forensic man into the glare of the headlights bathing the body. "You know what to do."

"DeShay."

The young patrolman was holding a trembling Gopher George by one arm. "This old guy was sleeping under some cardboard in the doorway."

"Did he see anything?"

"He must have. The problem is getting it out of him. My partner and I run him into the shelter now and then when the weather looks bad, but we've never gotten anything out of him yet."

"What's his name?"

"Who knows? I call him Gopher George. I think he's one of those people who was released from an institution and he settled here. Without a name, we can't even confirm that."

Gopher George's arms were

wrapped around his bag, his eyes looking at the cobblestones.

DeShay handed the patrolman a ten. "Take him somewhere and feed him. He already knows you won't hurt him and he may get around to trusting you if you treat him right. Let me know. There's one problem. If he saw what happened, the killer might have seen *him*."

"I don't think so. The first time, I was three feet away and didn't know he was there until he coughed."

"Then get him out of here and make sure the newsmen don't know about it. Those idiots would print his picture under a headline *Silent Witness*."

Hume had come up behind the patrolman.

"What they say about you is true, DeShay. You've become miserable in your old age."

"I've always been miserable. I hid my true personality because I expected to make commissioner. Now that I know I won't, I don't give a damn. What do we have?"

"Caucasian female. Sixteen, seventeen. No purse. No identification. Woven gold bracelet on the left wrist, too expensive for a kid wearing the makeup and clothes typical of a hooker—"

"When they're younger than eighteen, the sociologists call them victims of a fragmented

society lost in the frenzied pursuit of —"

"—which means robbery sure as hell couldn't have been the motive," continued Hume. "She was strangled, probably not long before she was dumped here. I'll check with vice to see if anyone knows her. If we're lucky, we go from there."

The grayness of a slow dawn was filtering into the alley. DeShay looked up at the buildings. One was a warehouse converted into expensive condominium apartments, the frosted glass in the awning-like windows retained for atmosphere but replaced in the upper row by clear glass to allow more light to enter from the always shadowed alley. In the air-conditioned building, with no way to look down, the people there would be of no help.

The other was once a waterfront hotel, convenient for sailors laying over who wanted to get off ship. It was now a seedy apartment house, windows on all three floors. Rectangular patches of light marked a scattered half dozen, the apartment occupant up early for one reason or another.

In one on the third floor, a silhouetted head peered down.

DeShay pointed it out to Hume. "Our anonymous female caller checking up on us?"

"Only one way to find out."

DeShay climbed the worn,

dimly lighted wooden stairs slowly and deliberately, placing each foot flat. The day when he could drive his two hundred pounds upward off the balls of his feet had ended when a metatarsal bone snapped, putting him in a cast for three weeks.

A sliver of light showed under one door. Hume knocked.

The voice was thin and reedy. "Who is it?"

"Police. We'd like to speak to you."

A small, middle-aged woman peered out the chain-held door.

Hume held up his I.D. "Have a minute?"

"No. I'm already late for work."

"Someone called—"

"That was Mattie. She used my phone. I don't know anything." The closing door was stopped by Hume's foot.

"Mattie?"

"Next door."

Hume removed his foot and said, "Thank you," to the alligatored varnish on the door panel.

A sliver of light appeared only after a third knocking.

The face in the door crack was round and full, the straight, white-streaked dark hair parted in the center and lopped off below the ears.

"You're Mattie?" asked Hume.

She studied him for a moment before the chain rattled and the door swung wide.

"I guess I can't get rid of you, so let's get this over with."

They followed her inside. She lowered herself into the chair at the window and propped up her swollen ankles.

"Just so we can save time, I was sitting here when I saw a man in the alley pull a body out of the trunk of a car and drive away, so I went next door and called from Kate's phone. Ask me what kind of car and I'll tell you it was a big one, not one of these shoeboxes running around today. The color was dark. Ask me about the man and I'll tell you I didn't see anything except his arms in the trunk light when he dragged the body out."

"What was he wearing?" asked DeShay.

She looked at him for a long moment.

"Now I've got it. You're the boss. You hang back and let the kid here do all the work while you watch, and then you come in with the zingers. Right?"

DeShay grinned. At thirty, Hume was hardly a kid.

"You've got it."

"A longsleeved shirt. Some kind of plaid, it looked like."

"You're sure you couldn't see anything else?"

"How could I? He left the engine running but turned off the headlights."

DeShay moved to the window and looked down into the alley. She was probably right. The

light from the street lamps on the through streets wouldn't bounce very far off those dingy brick walls.

"You did hear the engine running."

"What am I talking? Greek?"

"Did it purr or did it rumble?"

She stared at him.

"C'mon, Mattie. You know what I mean."

She looked at Hume. "He's pretty good, isn't he?"

Hume grinned. "The city wouldn't put up with him if he wasn't."

"It rumbled," she said to DeShay. "Now, I don't think even you can get more out of me than that." She hesitated. "A woman, wasn't it?"

"A girl. Sixteen or seventeen."

She rubbed her forehead. "Oh, God. I thought so. You couldn't save her, could you? That was the only reason I called. I thought there might still be a chance, that maybe she was just beaten up."

"She was dead when he brought her here, but you did right. Any chance he might have looked up and seen you?"

She shook her head. "I was sitting in the dark."

Why not? The dark can be full of good memories.

"Not even in the glow off the television?"

"That thing's been broken for months."

"You're a widow, Mattie?"

She sniffed. "I am if he's dead and buried. He ran out on me thirty-five years ago."

"I'm sorry."

Her voice had an edge to it. "He wanted to go. He went. If he wanted to come back, he knew where I was."

She glared at him. "What does my life history have to do with anything? Go teach the kid here how to find criminals before it's too late. You may be ten, fifteen years younger, but from the way you shuffle around, you don't have any more time left than I do."

Hume placed a card on the table. "Just in case. Call if you think of anything else. You'd better lock the door behind us."

Her voice was very tired. "In a minute."

Hume closed the door behind him.

"Almost as miserable as you."

"She lets you know where she stands. See if vice can tell you about someone on the large side who wears a plaid shirt and drives a diesel, probably a Mercedes."

"Large? Diesel? Mercedes?"

"He had to be big enough to wrestle a dead body around, she said the car rumbled which could mean diesel, and Mercedes because the car was big. Also because pimps like to go first class and guys who like to pick up young girls know that an

expensive car makes it easier. Pay attention. Mattie could be right. I may not be around long enough for you to learn it all. And make sure the media doesn't hear about *her*, either."

After they left, she sat staring out of the window. What made the big guy in the crumpled suit ask about Townsend?

They'd been good together, even after Sandy had come along. She'd never have put him down as a man who would run out on a wife and a seven-year-old daughter over a simple argument. He must have been looking for an excuse for a long time. Went to prove that living with a man for eight years and having his child didn't tell you much.

"If I go out that door, I'm not coming back, Mattie."

"Don't let me stop you."

She never thought he really meant it. Maybe she should have tried to find him, but he knew where she was. She sure as hell wasn't going anywhere, not with a seven-year-old on her hands and no job. But then they both were stubborn. World-class stubborn.

She closed her eyes.

No way to go through life without getting burned by a mistake. Her father used to tell her to feel sorry for others but never for herself because you were responsible for most of

what happened to you. After all, she could have taken that sample case from Townsend and made him to sit down and talk it over. She could have—

What? She could hardly remember what the fight had been about. That's what happened when you let ego get in the way of common sense. What had she proved? Townsend had his faults but he'd been a good husband, a good provider, always bringing her some little gift when he came back from a trip. He'd liked nice things and was never tight with a dollar. There had been no one like him since and there certainly would be no one like him now.

She felt herself slipping into sleep. No one can stay awake forever. Whether you wanted it to or not, your body insisted on pulling over to the curb and idling for a while to be ready for what came next. Except for the last time, when your battery failed.

She'd been getting off to such a slow start lately, her battery must be running low. She shifted to a more comfortable position. Not that it mattered to anyone. Except her.

The two patrolmen had dropped Gopher George off at the shelter, even though they knew he wouldn't stay. He didn't. As soon as they'd driven away, he'd hit the street, shuf-

fling along clutching his bag. Like an animal which wouldn't return to its lair until the odor of man dissipated, he wandered the streets until he found a spot in the sun. He took off his hat and placed it before him upside down because he had once seen another do that and was surprised when passersby dropped coins into it. If that was what one was supposed to do, fine.

The few coins he received he gave to the tall man at the shelter because he had no idea what else to do with them. When he was hungry, the tall man fed him. When his clothes became too filthy, the tall man gave him new ones.

He sat motionless in the sun, eyes closed. Brief images chased through his mind; split-second flashes on the screen of memory which, except for those that had taken place within the hour, never stopped long enough for him to connect one with the other.

Policeman . . . Food . . .

"Did you see the man, George?"

Man . . . Tall . . . Shadow . . .

"Just take it slow. The car came into the alley—"

Monster . . . Headlights . . . Noise . . .

"What did you see?"

Girl . . . Dead . . . Hand . . .

"Hand? What hand, George?"

Hand . . . Bracelet . . . Laugh . . . Man . . .

"The man laughed?"

Light . . . Bracelet . . . Shining . . . Pretty . . .

"Can you tell us what the man looked like, George?"

Monster . . . Bracelet . . . Woman . . .

"This is a waste of time. Let's get him back to the shelter."

Bracelet . . . Pretty . . . Woman . . . Pretty . . .

He sat motionless in the sun.

A passing foot brushed his hat and turned it over.

He didn't even notice.

The young patrolman found DeShay at his desk, sat down and passed his handkerchief over his forehead.

"Where's Hume?"

DeShay pulled his glasses down and looked at him coldly. "We have to account to you for where we go and what we do? If you must know, he's over at vice."

"No offense. Just wanted to tell you two I got nothing from George you can use. He did say the man laughed and that gold bracelet caught his eye, but that's it. Very little of what he says makes sense. Mutters to himself, just words, almost as if he's playing some sort of game."

"Maybe he is. Maybe he's trying to string them together."

"I don't know." The patrolman rose. "I was wondering—"

"Don't wonder. Speak up."

"I'd like to see if I could find out who he is. Corbett, at the shelter, says George is an odd one, not like the others. Showers when Corbett tells him to, never has to be reminded to clean up after himself, even helps out now and then. Corbett would like to keep him there because he can use someone like that, but George won't stay. Now if I could locate his records—"

He glanced up as Hume slid behind his desk.

"How?" asked DeShay.

"I'd like to look into that bag he carries."

"Worried about violating his civil rights? Just take it away from him."

"Not that. Personal rights, I guess. He trusts me. Maybe fingerprints—"

"Not without his permission." DeShay leaned back. "Of course, if Corbett handed you a cup or glass George used and asked you to check them out because he suspected him of being a fugitive—"

The patrolman grinned. "I'll see you, DeShay."

DeShay's phone rang.

"What's with him?" asked Hume.

"He's young and wants to help people. He'll grow out of it."

DeShay listened for a moment before saying, "Send him up."

"Send who up?" asked Hume.

"Trash man found something."

"Sanitation specialist."

"Don't mock your elders. What happened at vice?"

Hume leaned back in his chair, a smug grin on his face. "You want her name? I've got it. You want a diesel Mercedes? I've got it. You want the owner's name? I've got it. You want a description—"

"You want a new partner? You've got it."

Hume sighed. "You really take the pleasure out of life's little victories."

"Too few and far between to enjoy. Either we have him or we don't. Which is it?"

"We have him and we don't. We know who he is, but we still have to prove it."

"So where's the victory?"

The sanitation department man, muscles bulging through his thin shirt, made his way through the desks, leaving a redolent wake that caused heads to turn away.

Hume pinched his nose.

"Wrestle with garbage all day and you'd draw flies, too." DeShay looked up at the man. "Don't I know you?"

"Name's Hyland. About five years ago, you reamed me good when I found a knife and handled it. Never forgot." He looked at Hume. "Maybe I should have stopped for a shower before

coming over, but—" He placed a paper sack on DeShay's desk. "I thought this was more important."

DeShay tilted the sack and spilled out a smooth-surfaced, black plastic shoulder bag with a long strap.

"It was in one of those wire trash baskets over on Fifth. All I touched was the strap. Didn't even open it."

DeShay used his pencil to clear the strap away from the zipper.

"Why not?"

"Heard about that kid you found in the alley this morning. I may stink to high heaven after a day's work, but I'm an expert on things that people throw away. This isn't a high style item some lady didn't want any more. More like something a kid hooker would carry."

Using a paper clip to pull the zipper while holding the bag down with the eraser of his pencil, DeShay opened it and levered out a wallet. Draping a handkerchief over his hand, he unfolded it.

"Belonged to a Gemma Rodale."

Hume grinned. "That's her. She sure didn't throw it away, so he must have. And if he left a print—"

DeShay looked up at Hyland. "Sorry about the reaming."

Hyland shrugged. "I was brought up not to complain

when I was wrong, but to do better the next time. Want anything more from me?"

"Hume will take your statement." DeShay used his pencil under the strap to lower the bag into the sack. "I'm taking this to the lab."

The apartment went dark when Mattie turned off the thirteen inch television set. Nothing to watch except some bloody horror movie. She'd been hoping for one of those oldies with people like Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Even Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. They couldn't teach Nelson to act, but they sure could make Jeanette look pretty. My, those women were real stars. Beautiful. Glamorous. They made you wish you could look like that and they took you to a world you would never see in real life. Give her heroes and heroines, not some ratty-haired, long-legged bimbo hopping into bed with the first guy who came along and then weeping and tearing her hair out because he took off. That went on around you every day of your life. You even played the lead a few times. If those movie people thought that pain and suffering were entertainment, she could give them enough material for a series. Without going past her fortieth birthday.

Nice of that sloppy guy DeShay. He said a friend had intended to throw out the television, but he lied. No one throws out a perfectly good color television, and this one looked as though it had just come out of the carton. The guy was something.

They had the man who killed the girl. Would she testify? His bringing the television had nothing to do with the question. He was bigger than that.

You bet she would. She'd testify against any sucker who killed a sixteen-year-old if she had to waddle across town hanging on to one of those walkers.

Across the alley, the light came on in the ugly young guy's apartment on the second floor.

Watching them work on those apartments had given her something to do, but she wasn't stupid. The money being made there now could be made here, and one of these days a smart developer would buy this building and she'd be out. She didn't want to think about that. As it was, she just about got by on her Social Security and small pension. Even if they didn't take over the building, the way rents were going up she was headed for the street.

Good God, that ugly kid had brought home another woman, the third this week. What they saw in him, she didn't know.

but he was either going to wear himself out or be beaten to death when those women found out about each other.

These kids acted as though they'd discovered sex. Ha. Never occurred to them that everyone had gone down that road. Never occurred to them, either, that if you wanted to dance you paid the fiddler, even though it might take him a while to collect.

She'd tried to tell that to her daughter, but during the sixties all the kids had gone crazy. Imagine bringing home that long-haired bum and announcing he was moving in with her. What did she think she had there? A lost puppy? A stray cat? One look into those eyes and you knew she'd hooked up with a space cadet, but she wouldn't listen to that.

No way. Not under her roof. Not then, not now, not ever.

She hadn't seen Sandy since she'd thrown them both out. Not seen her or heard from her. Not a call; how are you, Mother? Not even a Mother's Day card. She often wondered if Sandy and that long-haired bum had a kid.

Grandmother.

Grandma Mattie. Sounded strange.

Her eyes were blurred when the apartment across the way went dark.

*The fiddler will get you, kid.
The fiddler collects from us all.*

Being a grandmother would be nice. But then maybe not. If the kid took after Sandy and her grandfather, it would just mean another heartbreak.

"You ever look for Townsend, Mattie?"

"He knew where to find me."

"Maybe he couldn't make it. Maybe something happened to him."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. My sister the nurse told me about a man who had been hit on the head so hard when he was mugged, he couldn't remember who he was and of course his wallet was gone. No one reported him missing so—"

Sure. Make excuses for him. Make excuses for Sandy. The kid had come back and cleaned her out one day while she'd been at work, even taken the jewelry Townsend had given her. They all did that. Didn't have a damned thing themselves, so they stole from their parents.

Decent kids waited for their parents to die.

"Don't forget, Mom. The Waterford crystal is mine. Make sure you put that in the will."

Valuable things. Unimportant things. It didn't matter. It was a link with the past, a memory of good times, of growing up, of love.

That spaced-out bum would have pawned everything for drugs, cutting Sandy's links.

But then maybe she wanted to keep nothing that reminded her of her mother.

Ah, Mattie, why are you crying? It was such a long time ago.

She brushed at her eyes and sipped at her wine. Damned stuff was getting more bitter all the time.

Three floors below, Gopher George twitched between his sheets of cardboard, the flashing images torturing him.

Shadow ... Car ... Pain ... Policeman ...

"What's your name?"

Nurse ... Doctor ... Car ... Building ... Man ...

"You'll have to stay here."

Woman ... Fence ... Gate ... Woman ... Girl ...

"Nothing we can do."

Woman ... Girl ... Dead ... Woman ...

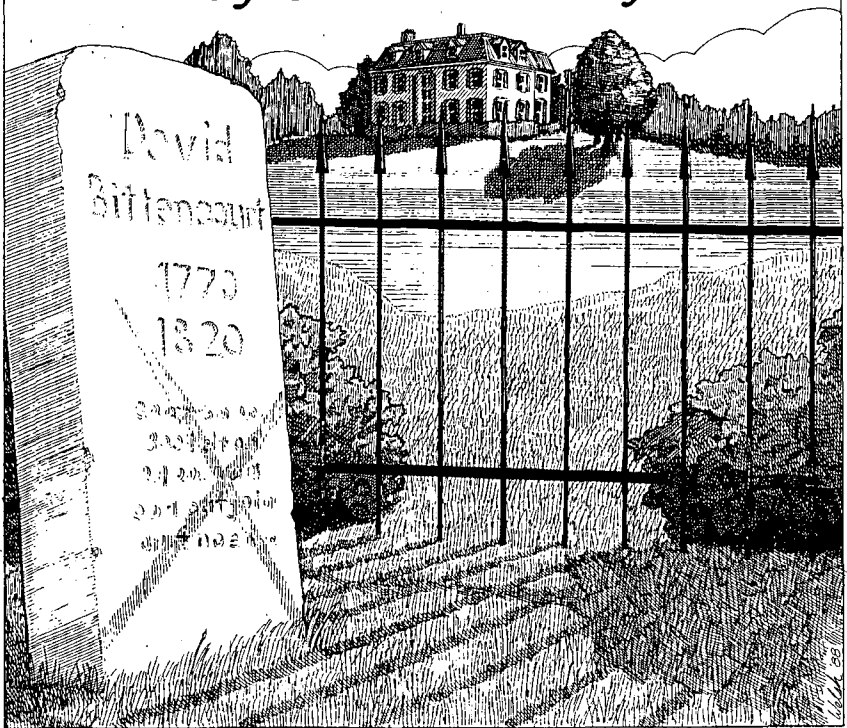
On and on. Images that blurred and blended so that he had no idea of what was past and what was present, that gave him no peace and made him moan and shrink deeper beneath his cardboard. Tonight, like the needle of a record caught in a groove, his mind hung up on one and stayed there until he fell asleep, as though trying to tell him this would connect and give meaning to all the others.

Bracelet ... Bracelet ... Bracelet ... Bracel ... Bra ... B ...

FICTION

Trial of a Tradition

by Gerald Standley



I don't believe in ghosts. At least I never did until recently, and even now I don't want Endicott to know that I've changed my mind. But it's hard to remain a disbeliever after the experiences I've had. Why, I've even *been* the ghost! No, I'm very much alive, thank you.

It started when this James Whittaker wrote me requesting a

"consultation on a very important matter." It turned out to be important to his aged father, Charles Whittaker. And of importance to me, too, since I'm a Bittencourt. I suppose that requires some explanation.

David Bittencourt was my great-great-great-grandfather. He came here from France in the late 1770's and like Lafayette took part, though a less notable one, in the Revolution. A few years thereafter the Pennsylvania Legislature, after noting that William Penn received Pennsylvania from the Crown, that men like Robert Morris declared its independence from George III, but that it took men like David Bittencourt to break completely, by force of arms, the last link with Britain; after so noting, I say, they awarded my ancestor a thousand acres in what was then the frontiers of civilization. He was indeed a valiant man—a dozen anecdotes attest to that—and he was no less a successful farmer. To the original grant he added half again as much by purchase.

He devotedly loved his first and only wife Ellen, a beautiful girl twenty years his junior who bore him six daughters but never the son he so desperately desired. You see, the name of Bittencourt is well worth preserving. I am told that throughout South America various important families bear our name, quite likely springing from European cousins of the head of our clan.

I am descended from the first of David and Ellen's daughters. After three more, the fifth was called Ultima, a name inviting conjecture. Was David despairing of ever begetting a son and now resigned to giving up the quest, or did the physician ordain that Ellen was not to undertake childbirth another time? Evidence for the latter: in 1817 she died giving David his sixth daughter. He was crushed, never remarried, and although barely fifty he followed her within three years to her grave.

To her grave! This story hangs on the location of that grave and on the determination of David's descendants not to allow the name Bittencourt to die. Every daughter made sure that Bittencourt was the middle name of each of her offspring, a tradition honored with few exceptions to this very day. Endicott's and my children both have this lineage buried under their middle initial. As to Ellen's grave, it is within a mile of this house, the oldest among many. David lies beside her, and around them in every direction are Bittencourts from succeeding generations.

Did you notice a registry when you came in—on the lectern beside the big Bible just under the portrait of David in his military

regalia with Ellen standing beside him? Well, that registry contains the name of just about every Bittencourt since that first burial, and a great many of them have chosen to be buried in the family cemetery: some, even, who have never in their lives seen it.

I grew up in the Great Depression. My mother before me, being a Bittencourt One (descended from the first daughter), had the responsibility of occupying this house, of maintaining it. We were land rich and cash poor in those days and this house showed it. (It was since the war that Endicott came along, married me and this old place, and restored its eighteen rooms to decency.) I once asked Mother why we couldn't sell some more land or even sell the entire place and move to less pretentious quarters. Her reply was a sad laughter that I should be so wanting in understanding.

"The Bittencourt home must never be sold, my dear!"

"The land, then?"

"There remains hardly a hundred acres. Thank goodness we held onto the mineral rights of what has been lost. But we mustn't sell any more."

"Why not? We lease it."

She smiled. "Where is the cemetery located, my dear?"

I said "Oh!" as if I understood, but at that time I was only eight. I'm glad Mamma hung on. For a house this size a hundred acres is none too big an estate. And the cemetery! It would be hard to sell any part of what is left without dividing the house from the graveyard overlooking the creek nearly a mile away.

But back to James Whittaker. His father Charles, soon to die, had expressed a wish to be buried here and the son had come to clear the matter with me, guardian of the Bittencourt heritage and grounds.

"But this is impossible," Endicott was explaining to him when I entered the drawing room. "The cemetery is a family one. Private. Only Bittencourts, their spouses or children are buried here."

"But my father . . ."

Endicott introduced us.

"The name Whittaker is very dear to us," I remarked, "despite its origin. I don't know what Whittakers you and your father may be from, but my great-great-great-grandmother's lady-in-waiting, I suppose you could call her, and very dear friend married a Whittaker. The only child she bore him was similarly the close friend

of my great-great-grandmother. And so on long after the name Whittaker disappeared. My Gertrude is a descendant of those close friends and has lived in this house all her life. But dear as they are, none of these persons are Bittencourts."

"I can't pretend to be as well acquainted with my forebears as you are, ma'am. Nevertheless, my father seems to feel that he has some title to lie among the Bittencourts. I can't bring him here to argue his case. He is far too feeble."

"There has never been a non-Bittencourt buried here." The finality of my voice was less than kind, I fear, so when he asked if he might return later when he was better informed I assured him that of course there was no objection. "Any descendant of that Whittaker is always welcome in this house!"

"That Whittaker.' You seem to speak with both respect and contempt in your voice."

"The respect is for four generations of women of that lineage who have been as close as any sisters to the occupants of this home. Why, the only other person living here beside my husband and me is Gertrude. Her mother lived here and Gertude and I grew up together in these rooms. But Gertrude is not a Bittencourt. I once asked my mother if she and I were cousins. 'No relation at all,' she replied. 'But it is part of David Bittencourt's will that a female descendant of Melissa Franchise (who later became Mrs. Whittaker) should always dwell here if she chose.'"

"The contempt, then?"

"The Mr. Whittaker whom she married was a worthless rascal. Franchise, Melissa's first husband, was killed in the War of 1812. This Whittaker, on marrying Melissa, adopted the boy born to that union but within a short time took to abusing both his wife and that son. David Bittencourt felt a strong obligation to protect Melissa and went to rebuke her husband. Instead of a promise of reform, what he received were discourteous, even abusive and scornful, retorts. On the spot he promised to meet the man at dawn, weapons to be chosen by the challenged. Both Melissa and David's wife begged him to desist. The man Whittaker was certainly not worth the risking of one's life. Their pleas and their fears were equally fruitless. David was determined to duel the man and went to the appointed place, but Whittaker had left town and was never again heard from. The pregnant Melissa gave birth to his daughter in one of the rooms upstairs. That daughter, and her daughters, have been cherished. But Whittaker himself . . . well!"

"The adopted son? The one Melissa bore her first husband?"

"A splendid lad, it appears. When grown he went to Philadelphia, thence to New York, some say, and distinguished himself as a lawyer. There is some evidence that he later took part in Pennsylvania politics, but I know very little of that. But even if you and your father are descended from him, he was hardly a Bittencourt. But you have much to be proud of, believe me!"

James Whittaker only nodded and presently excused himself.

He returned two days later with startling news. Records of his family, he assured us, established that that son born Ishmael Franchise, later Ishmael Whittaker, was indeed an ancestor of theirs. To this he added a remarkable fact. Ishmael was born in October of 1816.

Endicott looked puzzled. His history has always been a little weak.

"The last battle of the War of 1812," I reminded him, "took place early in 1815."

His jaw dropped. Mine closed with determination.

"I see your point, Mr. Whittaker. Would you be good enough to give us a day or two to think this entire matter over. I promise you an answer."

When he had left, Endicott turned to me. "Is the ugly head of scandal raising its shadow over the Bittencourt domain?"

"It's no joking matter," I told him. "David Bittencourt adored his wife. Infidelity is no companion to adoration."

"Come now! Men as great as David Bittencourt have had their moments of weakness. And pretty Melissa, newly widowed, lived right in this house with them."

"How do you know how pretty she was?"

"Gertrude's pretty."

"Are you trying to let me know in your oblique way that you have had 'moments of weakness'? If you are, you can forget it!"

"All right! But just because I am a faithful husband doesn't mean that David may not have slipped. Whose son *was* Ishmael, if not his?"

"On the other hand, we know he was born in this house. Does a woman consent to have her husband's illegitimate son brought into the world under her own roof? Would David have so wanted it? And Ishmael was raised under the same roof up to the time of Melissa's marriage to Whittaker."

Endicott only shrugged. I was furious. My own arguments were weaker than I wished them. *David, David*, I sighed to myself, *how I wish you were here to defend yourself.*

Perhaps he heard me. That night he appeared to me. I recognized him easily enough from his portrait. It was his face I saw. Grimacing. Looking me earnestly in the eyes, he opened his jaws twice at a time. Repeatedly. He appeared to know I could hear no voice, so his repetitions seemed intended to provide me a chance to read his lips. I experienced no fear whatever.

"Ghosts, nothing!" I insisted to Endicott. "I was dreaming. What's so remarkable about dreaming?"

"Dreaming! You *weren't* dreaming! You were wide awake. When you came back to bed, I asked you where you had been and you told me down by the portrait trying to understand what David was saying."

"I walk in my sleep sometimes. You know that."

"And you talk, too. But you were awake this time."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

Endicott smiled in a way he has that always melts me, as he well enough knows. Nonetheless I was partly angry. It is a smile that says, *Say what you will, you know I'm right.*

And I wasn't ready to agree to that.

He came upon me later as I stood in front of the bathroom mirror working my mouth the way I had seen David doing.

"What am I saying?" I asked him.

He watched. "Whatever it is, you're trying awfully hard to get it across."

"Well, what is it?"

"Looks like a G there in the back of your mouth. I'd guess AH-GAH."

The mirror was starting to steam up from the shower I had just finished. I wrote on it A-H-G-A-H. "What can that mean?"

"It's *your* dream," he said.

"You're no help." I was leaving when I heard his sharp *Hey!* I turned back. There where I had traced the letters were two additional marks. An arrow led the first H to an initial position, and the final H had been converted into an R.

"You did that!" But I had no sooner said it than I knew it wasn't true. Endicott's eyes were just as wide as mine.

Without bothering to change out of my robe, I rushed downstairs to the entrance hall, knelt at the Bible, and thumbed through its early pages. I knew Hagar was Abraham's time and so figured in Genesis. I found her in the opening verses of the sixteenth chapter:

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children; and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

I rose from my knees and rushed up the stairway to Endicott. "And Hagar's son was named Ishmael!"

He nodded. He knows his Bible better than he knows U.S. history. "But you'll never guess what I found written in the margin."

"I shan't even try to guess."

"It was a date penciled in. October 6, 1816. It was Ellen's hand."

"How do you know that?"

"As many pages as I've pored over, you think I don't know her handwriting?"

I led him downstairs. I was lifting the glass cover from the Bible and registry when I was stopped short by a sudden realization.

"When I read this just now, I was kneeling."

"Kneeling? You can't kneel and read anything on this lectern."

"I was kneeling. What's more," I added as I glanced at the wide boards at my feet, "I was kneeling on a carpet."

The scene now came back to me with complete clarity. "And this room was darker than it is now. Not by the time of day, but by the color of the walls. And there were two ladies sitting in chairs right over there. They were knitting, I think."

Endicott looked at me as if my mind were going.

"I'm only reporting what I saw. I knelt right here, I tell you, to read this Bible."

He merely murmured that now great-great-great-grandfather's integrity was restored. Then he studied the page I had opened to. "Where's the marginal note you were talking about? I don't see anything at all."

I looked closely at the place. If anything had been written there, it was now gone.

"Can you suppose I was dreaming?"

He only snorted. "Obviously it was a matter agreed upon by everyone concerned. There's something I can't understand, however. If Ishmael was intended to be David's son—as indeed he was—why was he ever allowed to leave the house and be adopted by Whittaker?"

"I think I know the answer to that, but let's check the Record of Births to make sure." I carefully turned the aging pages. The sixth daughter was born the following January. Ishmael was originally intended to be passed off as the son of Ellen, but with Ellen due to be delivered within four months, the plan miscarried. Ishmael was, and had to remain, the son of Melissa.

It is probably unnecessary to add that the newest grave in our cemetery is that of Mr. Charles Whittaker, descendant of David Bittencourt and from the very first intended to be a Bittencourt.

But I am compelled to tell you one more matter.

When Endicott was muttering to himself a few days later, I heard him say, "How strange! I can't understand it at all."

His words ignited something in my memory. "You haven't seen anything yet," I declared. "Come open the strong box."

There, in handwriting faded but still legible, was something I had first read as a child and always pooh-poohed until now. It was again Ellen's hand. Her journal:

Today Melissa and I had a remarkable experience. We were in the front hall where the light is better, when a strange apparition appeared. A woman, an elderly woman, rushed into the room from the stairway, knelt in front of the Bible, and opened it in great haste. She was dressed in an odd robe, was barefooted. Melissa saw her, too. Presently she returned to the stairs and ascended as hurriedly as she had first appeared.

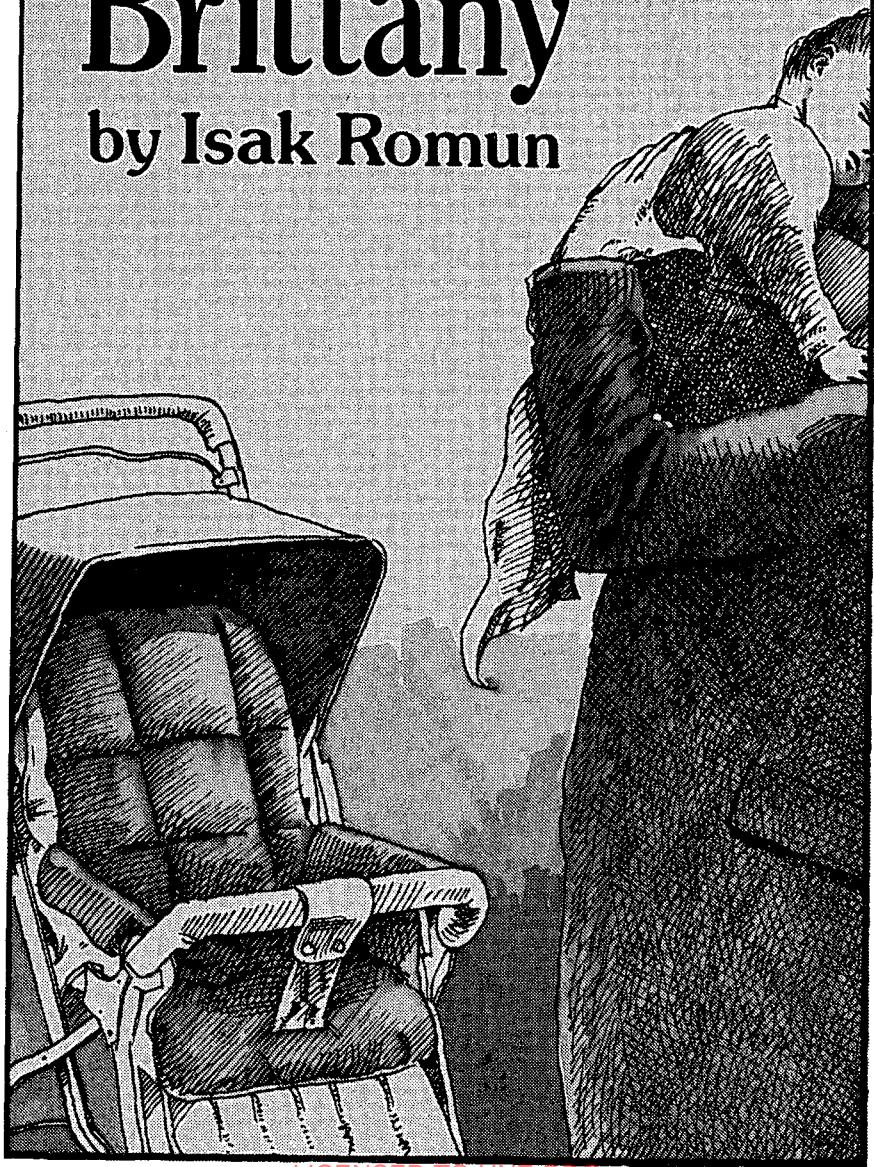
We went to the holy Book which still lay open at the place she had examined. It was at the sixteenth of Genesis. I'm sure she saw my entry there; I have now erased it.

How strange! I cannot understand it at all!

FICTION

Brittany

by Isak Romun



When I got to the paper that Friday, there was one of those *See-me-right-away!* notes on my desk. I went to my editor's office before settling into my own. He handed me a slip of paper. It had a phone number on it.

I looked at the slip and said, "I've arrived. You've finally entrusted me with your unlisted home number."

He looked up at me, customary sourness on his face. "Just call it, Monahan."

"What happens when I do?"

"You might get a kidnapping story."

"Kidnapping? Why didn't you call me at home?"

"A doll," he said, barely above a murmur.

"I can't handle affection this early in the morning."

"I mean a doll," he explained. "A real doll. A doll's been kidnapped."

"Wait. Hold on." I looked around his generally shabby office. "The acoustics in this place. I could have sworn I heard you say a doll's been kidnapped."

"You heard me."

"Aha, a doll," I said dully. "I see it now. Big. Truly big. Page one. Photos. Weeping owner. Touching shot of victim. If you've seen this doll, call—" followed by the missing-doll 800 hotline. Who knows, maybe we can get the doll's face on milk

cartons and junk-mail inserts. Which reminds me." I probed one of my pockets, pulled out a crumpled, envelope-sized card, and dropped it in front of him.

"What's this?"

"Read it," I said.

"You want me to buy a matched set of Naugahyde luggage?"

"Turn it over."

He did, saw the child's picture, the descriptive text. He said, "No."

"Think about it. There was another one just last week."

"And there'll be another one next week," he said patiently. "News is doing their job on it. Features, we'll pick it up again maybe in a half year or so."

I took the card from in front of him, balled it, threw it at his trash can. And didn't make it. "So, missing kids not important. But haul ass for missing doll."

"Just make the call, Monahan. Think humor. Think novelty piece. Go out there, talk to the people. Get back by eleven. I want to see you about something else."

"What'll it be? Some kid's toy bus involved in a major crackup on Washington Street?"

"Make the call, Monahan."

So I called the number, heard a flustered, close to distraught female voice telling me it didn't want any publicity. When I

pressed, the voice said tremulously, Okay, come over. I got an address and set out.

On my way to the address, I mentally scratched my head. My editor wasn't sending me out to write about a kidnapped doll. There was something else involved here. Something he was going to let me find out myself.

When I got to the place, I looked over the house. Just below middle middle class. Neat, single story, not exciting. Covered with plastic siding, a length of which had come loose above a front window. The driveway was spread with tamped-down gravel. It needed maintenance; my right rear wheel rested in a small hole. I skirted the miniature veldt masquerading as a front lawn. The entry walk was cement, old cement with widening fissures through which some valiant grass had pushed.

I rang the bell. The door opened before the last tone in the chime pattern. She looked the way she sounded on the phone, flustered and kind of helpless, the image we men had of all women until we were taught better. She had sheeny blonde hair that fell without form from her head, not quite reaching her shoulders. Her skin was blotchy; I must have gotten there before makeup time. When she opened her mouth, I saw she missed get

ting braces when she was a kid.

I introduced myself, she introduced herself, Gloria Kniver. We went into the living room, sat, and she started right in.

"She's driving me crazy about that doll. I had to ship her out to Mother's for the weekend. I couldn't stand all that weeping and wailing around the house." Then, as if just remembering, she reminded me, "I didn't call the paper."

"Well, who called?"

"I think Mother, thinking she was being helpful."

I consoled her by saying, "Well, Mrs. Kniver, if there's no story in this, there'll be nothing in the paper."

"Oh, thank you," she responded with a depth of gratitude usually reserved for firemen, lifeguards, bank loan officers, and the like. I reflected on how refreshing it was to meet a citizen who wouldn't jump through hoops to get her little story into print.

"It's a Lottie Lookalive," she said.

"Wait, Mrs. Kniver, what's a Lottie—?"

"Lookalive. It's the doll, Mr. Monahan. A Lottie Lookalive doll. For Kathy's birthday."

"And Kathy is—?" I pretty well knew; just wanted to be sure.

"Our—ah—my daughter."

The switch from "our" to "my" told me there was no Mr. Kniver

on the premises. I was speaking to a single parent, probably one who had recently entered that state.

"Look, Mrs. Kniver," I said, "let's go at this thing easy. The doll was kidnapped—"

"Stolen," she corrected. "Whoever said it was kidnapped?" She looked accusingly at a wall, beyond which, I supposed, her mother's house sat somewhere in the indeterminate distance.

"Okay, let's say stolen for now. So, start at the start and give me everything you have. And keep it in order, okay?"

What she had was not the stuff you find chiseled on stone tablets. Briefly, Gloria bought this Lottie Lookalive for Kathy on the kid's fifth birthday. It was expensive because it, well, looked alive. I found out Lottie Lookalives were all the thing at the time, outselling even the Cabbage Patch coterie.

Kathy was delighted with her new baby, her "daughter." The doll, *that* type of doll, was something she had wanted "all her life," which period of deprivation, in real terms, was somewhere in the neighborhood of three months. Kathy named the doll Brittany, indicating Gloria Kniver watched the soaps with her daughter in attendance.

Gloria pulled out Kathy's

old highchair and placed it in the service of Brittany. Kathy's carriage and its mattress were pressed into like service. Gloria rummaged through a chifforobe and brought forth clothing items Kathy wore as a baby. One of these was a one-piece pink handknit suit in which Kathy loved to dress Brittany.

I asked if there was a photo of Brittany. Gloria showed me one with the doll dressed in the pink outfit. If Gloria had told me it was a picture of a live kid at seven months, I would have believed her. She moved to take the picture back, but I asked her to let me have it for a day or so. If there was a story here, I'd need a shot of the doll.

Anyway, Kathy took Brittany everywhere, usually in the carriage, which wasn't so big it wouldn't fit in the back of Gloria's station wagon. On Thursdays, Gloria shopped for fresh fruit and vegetables at the City Market in Paulsburg. The day before, Thursday, she was at the Market. She took Kathy with her. And Kathy took Brittany, appropriately bundled against the elements. Brittany and her carriage were left outside along with a half dozen or so real bundled babies in *their* strollers and carriages.

The City Market was an old, renovated octagon of a building

which dated back to the eighteenth century. On Thursdays, the place was leased to farmers who trucked their produce in from the countryside. It was a busy place on "farmers' day," the customers sometimes elbow-to-elbow in the Market's narrow aisles.

That was why Brittany and her carriage were left outside while Gloria and Kathy went into the Market. When they came out, Brittany's carriage was there, but Brittany was not.

I had all my facts, but I was still curious about how I got the job of gathering them.

I asked, "Are you sure you *didn't* call my paper, the *Advance-Indicator*? We usually take first-party calls only."

"No," she said fiercely. "I told you, it was probably Mother." More dirty looks directed at the wall. "I made the mistake of telling her when I called saying I was bringing Kathy over."

"I just don't understand why she'd call the paper."

"Well, I don't think she did. I think she called the police."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because they called and said they'd tell the area patrol to look out for Brittany."

I tried to register a puzzled look before I said, "I still don't have a handle on it. The police don't give us anything unless

we go over there and pry it loose." Then I thought of my police contacts. "Unless it's something of blockbuster status. But I don't think Brittany's disappearance falls into that category."

"Well, Mr. Monahan," she said, holding her exasperation in tow, "I don't know how or where you got your information, but as I told you, I'm not interested in any publicity."

"You may not have a worry in the world on that score." I looked at my sparse notes. "I'll be going now," I said, closing the notebook.

En route to the front door, I whispered, just as if the kid were somewhere rattling around the house, "Look, Mrs. Kniver, why not just buy Kathy a new Lottie Lookalive and pass it off as the one that got lost?"

"Do you know how much those things cost?" she whispered back. "Only reason I could get it, I pried some dollars out of her father. And, then, the suit. It'd take forever to duplicate it. It's handknit. And I can't remember where I put the instructions for safekeeping. That was almost five years ago. To complicate things, even if I could afford it, there's a waiting list a mile long for Lottie Lookalives."

After this recitation, she looked sadder than ever. I felt

a brief and unbidden welling of sympathy. Damn! I thought, and tried to put my heart in my head.

I almost said something comforting but pulled up short of that and, instead, said, "I see." I knew, however, I couldn't let this thing go. All the way to the paper, Gloria's image stayed in my mind with frontal-lobe prominence. To still my Irish heart, I had to do something for her. But not before that eleven o'clock meeting with my editor.

When I got back to the paper a few minutes before eleven it became resoundingly evident why my editor sent me off on the Kniver fiasco. As I walked through the labyrinth of cubicle corridors on my office floor, I couldn't help but notice the silence. Really unusual—and welcome—for a newspaper plant. The silence lasted only seconds, though. It was as if the whole place exploded. Cubicle partitions were thrust aside, people jumped out, cameras flashed, confetti flew, party horns tooted, and everyone joined in a finely-rehearsed and unisonous "SURPRISE!" My editor detached himself from the crowd and strode toward me.

While he was on the way, I glanced around and saw faces

I had known for years, some for the better part of two decades. Seana, the switchboard operator, was there. So was Abe Slaughter, the photographer with whom I usually worked when I had a picture story. Hector Aloysius Brosnan, my main police contact in Paulsburg, was in a corner coddling a large glass of beer. And standing with Brosnan, her face beaming with what should have been sisterly pride, but was more likely motherly in nature, was my sister Maureen. What was going on?

I soon found out. A couple of copy boys rolled a large sheet cake into view. On it, cunningly inscribed in green (my favorite color), was the message, "Congratulations Oscar! 25 years with TPA-I." (The last stood for the Paulsburg *Advance-Indicator*.)

My editor grabbed my arm and moved me toward the cake. "Thought we forgot, didn't you?" he crowed. "Surprised, Oscar?"

All of a sudden everyone was using my first name. "This why you sent me off on that missing-doll thing? To get me out of the way?"

"Right. Thanks to our local friendly policeman." He nodded toward Brosnan.

"I forgot," I said. "But *you* remembered?"

"We had some help," my ed-

itor replied. This time he nodded toward Maureen.

"Thanks, Maureen," I mumbled and sort of waved in her direction. More sisterly/motherly beaming.

"Like the cake?" my editor asked.

"There should be a comma after 'Congratulations.'"

We cut the cake and ate some of it and drank soda mixed and unmixed with stronger fluids. I got a plaque and a paper-weight set commemorating the event. People came and went in tune with the necessity of keeping the paper operative while all the celebratory nonsense was going on. I thanked Brosnan, the author of my singularly fruitless morning. Pumped hands all around. Saw my sister off so she could get home to prepare all my favorites for dinner. After an hour or so the crowd began to thin out, only the diehards, like Brosnan, sticking around till the strong stuff gave out. One of the last to leave was Carol Lyndham of Classifieds. I caught her at the elevator.

"Too late to get something in today's paper?"

She looked at her watch. "Half hour to go, give a minute or two on either side."

"Good. Wait, please." I sat down at a nearby desk and put

some sentences on a memo pad. I tore the sheet off the pad and handed it to Carol. "I'd appreciate it if you could give it some prominence."

She read it briefly, tried to hide a smile, then said, "I'll see what I can do, Oscar."

I went back to the remnants of the party. Copy boys were cleaning up. Just about everyone had gone except my editor and Brosnan. I joined them.

"Anything from this morning you can use?" my editor asked.

"The net result of this morning's charade is that I've got a lump here." I touched my chest around where the heart is supposed to be.

"Why's that?"

"Just let's say the woman is of a type to rouse a dragon's sympathy."

"I see," my editor said and smiled in a way I didn't like.

Actually, I think I went red because the smile became wider and even Brosnan tried one. "It's not that," I stammered, then eyed Brosnan.

"He told me to come up with something outlandish," Brosnan explained.

"You succeeded," I said. "I'll see you next week, Heck. We'll take a trip. A short one." And I told him and my editor why.

Brosnan said fine, he was always happy to cooperate with the press, particularly in the

apprehension of malefactors. Then he drank off the last beer and left.

Later, at home, I got a call from the paper's night switchboard. Seana had left a note asking the operator to field all answers to my classified ad. That is, get numbers and relay them to me at home. As it was, there was one call. I wrote down the number the operator gave me, said thanks, and hung up. I had the phone off the hook again in seconds. I dialed the number, heard the ring.

A husky voice answered. I identified myself. The voice said, "I have what you advertised for."

"Hold on," I said. "Who are you and what do you have?"

"Name's Bruce Curtin and I have what you advertised for."

"I want to hear you say it."

"The doll," Curtin said patiently. "Lottie Lookalive, like you asked."

"Tell me, what's it wearing?"

"As you yourself advertised, a pink handknit suit."

"Can you bring it over?"

"Sure. If you got the reward ready."

I assured Curtin I had, and gave him my address and directions.

"There's something, though," Curtin said.

"What's that?"

"It's all broken up. Like whoever left it in that alley was hacked off about something and took it out on the doll. Still want it?"

I asked, "You found it in an alley? You didn't take it from a carriage at the City Market yesterday?"

Curtin didn't answer right away. Then he said, "Look, this is getting very sticky. No, I didn't lift this doll out of some woman's carriage. What do you think I am? I found it on my way home from work, smashed up like I said. Now, do you want this doll or not?"

"I want the doll. Bring it over. Make sure you bring all the pieces. And the suit."

After I hung up, I waited about five minutes and redialed Curtin's number. It rang a long time before someone answered. It wasn't Curtin. It was someone who'd been waiting for a bus near the ringing pay phone.

Curtin had come and gone, clutching two tens and a five. He had a lot to say for someone looking for money. He remarked that Maureen and I didn't look much like types who'd be interested in dolls. I said we weren't. He said offhandedly, "Oh, who is?" and didn't press for an answer when I pointedly didn't

give him one. He queried us about our kids, then amended it to grandkids. I didn't tell him Maureen and I were sister and brother. I just shoved money into his waiting fist and showed him the front door.

After Curtin left, I took the handknit suit off Brittany and turned it over to Maureen. Then I arranged the doll on one end of the dining room table. I carefully pieced together the head as best I could. I shoved a separated arm into a shoulder socket so I could get an idea of what the whole doll looked like. A leg had been twisted but not torn off. There were two neat slits in the trunk forming a cross through which stuffing hung out.

At the other end of the table, Maureen had laid out the suit and was examining the damage.

"I think it can be repaired," she said. "I'll have to check my yarn to see if I have a match."

"If you don't, something close might do."

"No, I'll have to get a match. Even if I go out for it."

"Can you do it tonight?"

"I suppose. It'll have to be washed and slow-dried after I repair the holes and tears." She looked up from the suit, made a gesture encompassing both suit and doll. "Why would someone do this?"

I pointed at the doll's broken face. "Look."

Maureen did and said, "She looks so real."

"That could be your answer, Maureen."

Saturday morning. Early. I leaned on Gloria Kniver's doorbell, heard the same chimes I'd heard the day before. She opened the door. I pushed the doll into her arms. It was a Lottie Look-alive I had bought the night before. I had no trouble getting it. The toy-store manager owed me a favor. The doll, a reborn Brittany, was dressed in the pink suit Maureen had skillfully repaired.

Gloria looked at the doll and said, "Brittany!"

"Is that Brittany? You sure?"

"Of course it's Brittany, it's got her suit." Then she looked closer. After a bit she turned and went into the house. I followed her. We stopped in the living room.

She put Brittany on a chair and went off somewhere. She was back in less than a minute with a crisp-looking piece of paper in her hand. "Birth certificate," she explained.

She examined the doll against information on the certificate. "This is Brittany," she said with authority. "Everything checks. And I know this suit. I

made it myself for Kathy. I saw your classified."

"Yeah. We were in luck. I got a call last night."

"There was a reward. I'll try to pay you back. I have to see my husband, though, to get the money."

I waved a hand. "The paper'll reimburse me. I've got a little something up my sleeve."

"I can't thank you enough," Gloria said. She was markedly warmer than she was on my last visit. But I could see something was still nagging her.

"Don't think about thanks," I said. "And, no, it's not over."

"What's left?"

"Remember my magic sleeve?" I said breezily. "There's still a story in this thing. Don't worry, not *your* story. Keep your eye on my column for the next week or so."

I turned, walked to the front door. There I stopped, turned again. She was right behind me. Close. And her face had new worry lines joining the ones already there. I wondered if I'd said something to bring them on.

"Mrs. Kniver—Gloria," I said, "don't go to the Market next Thursday."

"I have to go. I'm bringing something back."

"After a week that stuff goes bad."

She shook her head as if

clearing it. "I always go on Thursdays," she said.

"Don't. I'll bring a couple of bags of produce by."

"But—"

"I try to avoid cliches, but I'll make an exception this once."

She asked, "What do you mean?"

"Trust me."

The week ended and a new week started. Sunday through Wednesday sped by, lost in routine except for one thing. Or two things. Two nights in a row, Maureen, who wakes if a feather hits the floor, heard noises outside the house—once a trash can being knocked over, once footsteps on the pavement outside the garage. The first night, I mumbled something about cats. The second night, I got up, opened a window, made myself highly visible and vocal, and flourished an old, undermaintained gun that might have exploded if I'd had to use it. I definitely heard the sound of someone moving out quickly. We called the police and the next night's sounds were of them checking the house and grounds.

Thursday was chilly. The morning, anyway. My car engine was laboring under the strain of the heater, which had been going about two hours while we sat parked. Brosnan

was beside me in the passenger seat. Abe Slaughter was in the back seat, stretched out, his eyes closed. His head rested on his camera sack. The camera he intended using—if we got lucky—sat on his stomach, held there by his folded hands.

Our car was in a slot across the narrow street from the City Market. We had pulled into the space so that, through the windshield, we had a perfect view of the carriages on either side of the Market's main entrance.

"The criminal returns to the scene," Brosnan growled. "I wish he'd snap it up."

"Just wait."

"I don't mind waiting, Monahan, but I'd just like to be sure I'm waiting for something."

I leaned forward over the wheel. Brosnan noticed my movement, put his face close to the windshield. A young dark-haired woman—I guessed between twenty-five and thirty—was walking among the baby carriages. She was wearing a flowing winter coat.

I strained my arm to poke the figure in the back seat. "Abe, get this!" I pointed toward the young woman. Abe jumped up, leaned across the back of the front seat, and began shooting through the windshield, one camera click about every two seconds.

"Get her face," I said. "Get her looking in those carriages."

"Stick to your typewriter," Abe said. "I'll handle the camera."

The woman was still going from carriage to carriage. At one, she reached in and appeared to be rearranging a cover. I guess she was satisfied with what she saw. She looked warily right and left, then bent over the carriage, her shape and coat almost completely shielding it from view. She seemed to be taking a long time. When she righted herself, she was holding a bundled form. She started walking toward a gray van.

Brosnan got out of the car—quickly. He straightened up and pointed lazily, but authoritatively, at the woman.

Sergeant Dempsey, Brosnan's deputy, and three other plainclothesmen burst from some cars and converged on the woman, who by this time had reached the van. Abe Slaughter, still clicking away, jumped from my car and moved in with the cops. I got out of the car and followed Brosnan as he went toward the van.

At the van, Dempsey and the other cops were doing their cop things. Dempsey wrenched open the driver's door and told the man behind the wheel to get out. It was my doll-finder, Bruce Curtin. A cop relieved the

woman of her burden, while another read her and Curtin their rights. After that, she and Curtin were cuffed. By this time Brosnan and I had reached the small group.

"Let's see what we have here," Brosnan said, taking the bundle from the cop. Brosnan pulled aside the thin blanket covering the face and then pulled the blanket off entirely. He pinched the little exposed figure several times and with increasing pressure. I was about to object when he said, "Hey, Monahan, you said it would be a baby, a real baby. This is a *doll*!" He stopped, then repeated unbelievably, "A doll."

Without answering Brosnan, I took off, heading for the City Market. He and a couple of the cops followed. When I got to the Market entrance, I went toward the carriage from which our suspect-in-custody had taken the doll. Just before I got there, a woman, older than the one in custody, reached the carriage. She grabbed the handle possessively and started trundling the carriage away—pretty rapidly, I'd say.

I faced around to Brosnan, but he'd already grasped what was going on. His two colleagues grabbed the woman and her carriage and in no time had their Miranda cards out. After that, Brosnan tore the covers

off the carriage's contents.

He looked at me in a manner curiously similar to the way my sister Maureen looks at me. You know, beaming. Like I was a dearly beloved or something. "What now, Oscar, you darlin' man?"

"I suggest you open that," I said, indicating the bulging cloth sack that lay in the carriage.

He did. Its contents were exactly what I thought they would be. I began walking away in the direction of the Market entrance.

"Where you off to?" Brosnan called after me.

I looked back over my shoulder. "I've got some shopping to do," I said and kept going. It had come to me with suddenness what Gloria was worried about last time I saw her.

"I want to give his nibs here—" Brosnan motioned at me as he talked across the table to Maureen—his chance to crow."

"What's to crow about?" I asked. "I wasn't exactly right, was I?"

"You weren't exactly wrong, either. Even at the very end there, I was going to settle for a doll heist. And then you dump something on us really worth the effort."

We stopped talking and concentrated on the dessert. The three of us pushed forks into our pumpkin pie or drank tea. After a while, Brosnan put down his fork and said, "Up to that time, I was expecting to see a baby, and I think you were, too. Why'd you change your mind so fast? When you saw the doll?"

I pushed aside my second piece of pumpkin pie, unfinished. Maureen frowned. Our upbringing made her deplore waste. But she didn't scold me. Instead, she asked, "You thought it was a baby, Oscar? Why?"

I pulled out the photo Gloria Kniver gave me and handed it to Maureen. "Could you tell?"

"No. She—I've already said it looks real."

"That first pickup, Brittany was all wrapped up. I figured the dollnapper couldn't see it was a doll. Also, I reasoned whoever it was had to act fast. There wasn't time for a close look. But she didn't mistake Brittany for a baby. She just picked out the wrong Lottie Lookalive. So her people probably made arrangements for her to pick up the right doll the next Thursday. Today."

"Still haven't answered my question," Brosnan said.

I pulled my pie back, prodded it tentatively with my fork. Maureen smiled. "I was re-

membering the cross made by those two cuts in Brittany's chest. They were neat. Very neat. Those cuts must have formed perfect or near-perfect ninety-degree angles. As if a surgeon made incisions. Not jagged as they'd be if someone were in a rage. It was the kind of cut made by someone going into the doll to find something."

"I should have known," Brosnan whispered, then shook his head slowly. "One thing. Did you always figure Bruce Curtin in on it?"

"Well, the pay phone was suspicious. But I was suspicious of him before I found out about that. On the phone, he talked about 'some woman's carriage.' If he wasn't in on the first pickup, the natural tendency would have been to say it was a kid's doll carriage. But he knew it was a regular carriage. One for a real kid, but holding a doll. So he said so. That told me he was involved."

Maureen said, "What must have gone through their minds last week when they saw it was the wrong doll. When there was nothing in it. Mad, I guess, mad enough to take it out on the doll."

"No, it wasn't that," I told Maureen. "They broke up the doll, I think, to see if the stuff was stashed somewhere else in it."

"A girl's best friend," Brosnan said, accepting a third piece of pie from Maureen. "Diamonds. Probably just off the boat. I wonder how long it's been going on. We may soon find out. Out of all three of them, Curtin and the two women. They're singing sweet songs on each other as well as on people we're in the process of picking up. I don't know where we'll end up, but I think we got something major here." He tore himself away from the pie for a moment and looked over at me. "Don't use any of that, Oscar, we don't want to alert any criminal types."

I waded away the possibility of a further story. "I've written my first and last words about this thing. I don't want to visit it again."

"But you know it's not over yet, don't you," Brosnan said suddenly and looked at me with a quick, intense, humorless stare. Maureen seemed to sense something going on and left the room.

"I know that," I said when I heard dishes rattling in the kitchen.

"There's still the matter of someone trying to get into your house. I think it was Curtin, and I'll get it out of him sometime soon. As soon as we get that other bag, the first one, the one he thought was hidden somewhere here."

I concentrated on remaining impassive, saying nothing.

Brosnan leaned back in his chair and built a mound of fingers on his chest. "They're not saying anything about that. Just now. Maybe each hopes somehow to get that first sack if he or she manages to get off or get out early. If so, you'll have more visitors. It stands to reason the payoff sack we picked up today was the second sack. The stones-in-a-doll didn't pass last week, but I'm sure the money did. An absolute loss for Curtin or those over him. So we've got a sack of money floating around out there somewhere. Last week's sack."

"Somewhere," I said.

"And we know where it is—or was. Don't we, Oscar? That sack was probably put in the carriage that—whatsername?—Brittany was snatched from." He leaned forward, picked up his cup, and pretended to drink. But I knew the cup was empty. He was creating penetration time. I didn't respond, so he went on. "Her place is staked out, Oscar. I didn't think to do that until late. Tomorrow we move in. I may pull her in whether I find the money or not. Unless I get some answers tonight, here and now at this table. When you left me today at the Market, I figured out—finally—where you were going with those two bags of

groceries. My bad luck, I've been two steps behind you all day long."

I leaned forward, too, put my elbows on the table. "Sometimes a great temptation immobilizes you. You don't do anything wrong, but you don't do anything right either. Sometimes someone has to come in and remove the need for decision."

"Anything you said got anything to do with our present situation?"

"Just musings," I replied, straining to hear an expected sound.

Brosnan looked worried. "Look, Oscar, we go back a long ways—"

The doorbell rang. Maureen went to answer it.

I said, "Before the history lesson, let's see what that is."

I heard the front door shut. Maureen came into the dining room with one of those striped messenger envelopes. "It's for you, Heck." She handed it over and went back out to the kitchen.

Brosnan ripped the envelope open. A key fell out.

"Looks like a key," he said.

"You know, it does," I said.

"Like a key to one of those luggage lockers at the bus depot."

"It sure does," he said. "Maybe I'll just pop down there and see what's in that locker."

"Good idea," I said. "It may be that afterwards you can pull those guys off stakeout so they can get a good night's sleep. And so a single mother with plenty to worry about can stop worrying about them."

He thought about this, then made up his mind. "Why not? If that locker has in it what I hope it has."

"I said 'afterwards,' didn't I?"

"So you did. Want to come?"

"No, I have a phone call to make."

He looked at his watch. "Wait at least a half hour before you make it."

"Why?"

"It's terrible these days. You never know who's listening in. Crossed lines, of course. The phone company should do something about it."

"And you think in thirty minutes they will?"

"I guarantee it," Brosnan said.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Man Who Could Work Miracles

by H. G.
Wells

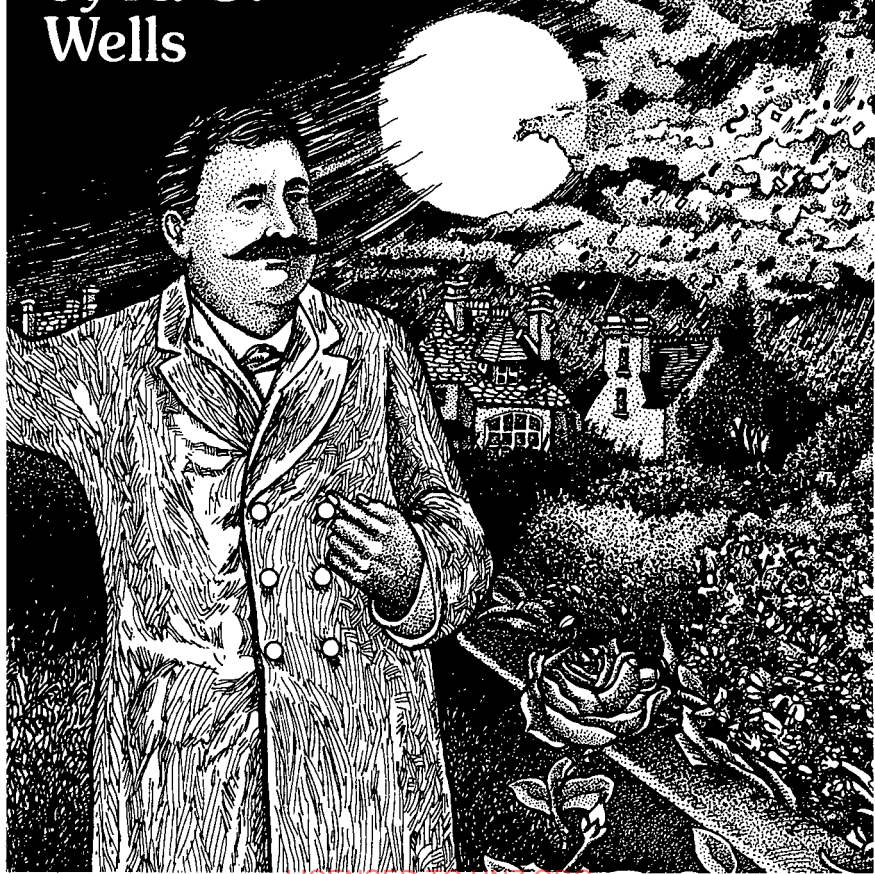


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

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It is doubtful whether the gift was innate. For my own part, I think it came to him suddenly. Indeed, until he was thirty he was a skeptic, and did not believe in miraculous powers. And here, since it is the most convenient place, I must mention that he was a little man, and had eyes of a hot brown, very erect red hair, a mustache with ends that he twisted up, and freckles. His name was George McWhirter Fotheringay—not the sort of name by any means to lead to any expectation of miracles—and he was a clerk at Gomshott's. He was greatly addicted to assertive argument. It was while he was asserting the impossibility of miracles that he had his first intimation of his extraordinary powers. This particular argument was being held in the bar of the Long Dragon, and Toddy Beamish was conducting the opposition by a monotonous but effective "*So you say*" that drove Mr. Fotheringay to the very limit of his patience.

There were present, besides these two, a very dusty cyclist, landlord Cox, and Miss Maybridge, the perfectly respectable and rather portly barmaid of the Dragon. Miss Maybridge was standing with her back to Mr. Fotheringay, washing glasses; the others were watching him, more or less amused by the present ineffectiveness of the assertive method. Goaded by the Torres Vedras tactics of Mr. Beamish, Mr. Fotheringay determined to make an unusual rhetorical effort. "Looky here, Mr. Beamish," said Mr. Fotheringay. "Let us clearly understand what a miracle is. It's something contrariwise to the course of nature done by power of Will, something what couldn't happen without being specially willed."

"*So you say*," said Mr. Beamish, repulsing him.

Mr. Fotheringay appealed to the cyclist, who had hitherto been a silent auditor, and received his assent—given with a hesitating cough and a glance at Mr. Beamish. The landlord would express no opinion, and Mr. Fotheringay, returning to Mr. Beamish, received the unexpected concession of a qualified assent to his definition of a miracle.

"For instance," said Mr. Fotheringay, greatly encouraged. "Here would be a miracle. That lamp, in the natural course of nature, couldn't burn like that upsy-down, could it, Beamish?"

"*You say it couldn't*," said Beamish.

"And you?" said Fotheringay. "You don't mean to say—eh?"

"No," said Beamish reluctantly. "No, it couldn't."

"Very well," said Mr. Fotheringay. "Then here comes someone, as it might be me, along here, and stands as it might be here, and says to that lamp, as I might do, collecting all my will—"Turn upsy-

down without breaking, and go on burning steady,' and—Hullo!"

It was enough to make anyone say "Hullo!" The impossible, the incredible, was visible to them all. The lamp hung inverted in the air, burning quietly with its flame pointing down. It was as solid, as indisputable as ever a lamp was, the prosaic common lamp of the Long Dragon bar.

Mr. Fotheringay stood with an extended forefinger and the knitted brows of one anticipating a catastrophic smash. The cyclist, who was sitting next the lamp, ducked and jumped across the bar. Everybody jumped, more or less. Miss Maybridge turned and screamed. For nearly three seconds the lamp remained still. A faint cry of mental distress came from Mr. Fotheringay. "I can't keep it up," he said, "any longer." He staggered back, and the inverted lamp suddenly flared, fell against the corner of the bar, bounced aside, smashed upon the floor, and went out.

It was lucky it had a metal receiver, or the whole place would have been in a blaze. Mr. Cox was the first to speak, and his remark, shorn of needless excrescences, was to the effect that Fotheringay was a fool. Fotheringay was beyond disputing even so fundamental a proposition as that! He was astonished beyond measure at the thing that had occurred. The subsequent conversation threw absolutely no light on the matter so far as Fotheringay was concerned; the general opinion not only followed Mr. Cox very closely but very vehemently. Everyone accused Fotheringay of a silly trick, and presented him to himself as a foolish destroyer of comfort and security. His mind was a tornado of perplexity, he was himself inclined to agree with them, and he made a remarkably ineffectual opposition to the proposal of his departure.

He went home flushed and heated, coat collar crumpled, eyes smarting, and ears red. He watched each of the ten street lamps nervously as he passed it. It was only when he found himself alone in his little bedroom in Church Row that he was able to grapple seriously with his memories of the occurrence, and ask, "What on earth happened?"

He had removed his coat and boots, and was sitting on the bed with his hands in his pockets repeating the text of his defence for the seventeenth time, "I didn't want the confounded thing to upset," when it occurred to him that at the precise moment he had said the commanding words he had inadvertently willed the thing he said, and that when he had seen the lamp in the air he had felt that it depended on him to maintain it there without being clear how this was to be done. He had not a particularly complex mind,

or he might have stuck for a time at that "inadvertently willed," embracing, as it does, the abstrusest problems of voluntary action; but as it was, the idea came to him with a quite acceptable haziness. And from that, following, as I must admit, no clear logical path, he came to the test of experiment.

He pointed resolutely to his candle and collected his mind, though he felt he did a foolish thing. "Be raised up," he said. But in a second that feeling vanished. The candle was raised, hung in the air one giddy moment, and as Mr. Fotheringay gasped, fell with a smash on his toilet table, leaving him in darkness save for the expiring glow of its wick.

For a time Mr. Fotheringay sat in the darkness, perfectly still. "It did happen, after all," he said. "And 'ow I'm to explain it I *don't* know." He sighed heavily, and began feeling in his pockets for a match. He could find none, and he rose and groped about the toilet table. "I wish I had a match," he said. He resorted to his coat, and there were none there, and then it dawned upon him that miracles were possible even with matches. He extended a hand and scowled at it in the dark. "Let there be a match in that hand," he said. He felt some light object fall across his palm, and his fingers closed upon a match.

After several ineffectual attempts to light this, he discovered it was a safety match. He threw it down, and then it occurred to him that he might have willed it lit. He did, and perceived it burning in the midst of his toilet table mat. He caught it up hastily, and it went out. His perception of possibilities enlarged, and he felt for and replaced the candle in its candlestick. "Here! *you* be lit," said Mr. Fotheringay, and forthwith the candle was flaring, and he saw a little black hole in the toilet cover, with a wisp of smoke rising from it. For a time he stared from this to the little flame and back, and then looked up and met his own gaze in the looking glass. By this help he communed with himself in silence for a time.

"How about miracles now?" said Mr. Fotheringay at last, addressing his reflection.

The subsequent meditations of Mr. Fotheringay were of a severe but confused description. So far as he could see, it was a case of pure willing with him. The nature of his first experiences disinclined him for any further experiments except of the most cautious type. But he lifted a sheet of paper, and turned a glass of water pink and then green, and he created a snail, which he miraculously annihilated, and got himself a miraculous new toothbrush. Somewhen in the small hours he had reached the fact that his will power

must be of a particularly rare and pungent quality, a fact of which he had certainly had inklings before, but no certain assurance. The scare and perplexity of his first discovery were now qualified by pride in this evidence of singularity and by vague intimations of advantage. He became aware that the church clock was striking one, and as it did not occur to him that his daily duties at Gomshott's might be miraculously dispensed with, he resumed undressing, in order to get to bed without further delay. As he struggled to get his shirt over his head he was struck with a brilliant idea. "Let me be in bed," he said, and found himself so. "Undressed," he stipulated; and, finding the sheets cold, added hastily, "and in my nightshirt—no, in a nice soft woollen nightshirt. Ah!" he said with immense enjoyment. "And now let me be comfortably asleep. . . ."

He awoke at his usual hour and was pensive all through breakfast-time, wondering whether his overnight experience might not be a particularly vivid dream. At length his mind turned again to cautious experiments. For instance, he had three eggs for breakfast; two his landlady had supplied, good, but shoppy, and one was a delicious fresh goose egg, laid, cooked, and served by his extraordinary will. He hurried off to Gomshott's in a state of profound but carefully concealed excitement, and only remembered the shell of the third egg when his landlady spoke of it that night. All day he could do no work because of this astonishing new self-knowledge, but this caused him no inconvenience because he made up for it miraculously in his last ten minutes.

As the day wore on his state of mind passed from wonder to elation, albeit the circumstances of his dismissal from the Long Dragon were still disagreeable to recall, and a garbled account of the matter that had reached his colleagues led to some badinage. It was evident he must be careful how he lifted frangible articles, but in other ways his gift promised more and more as he turned it over in his mind. He intended among other things to increase his personal property by unostentatious acts of creation. He called into existence a pair of very splendid diamond studs, and hastily annihilated them again as young Gomshott came across the counting house to his desk. He was afraid young Gomshott might wonder how he came by them. He saw quite clearly the gift required caution and watchfulness in its exercise, but so far as he could judge the difficulties attending its mastery would be no greater than those he had already faced in the study of cycling. It was that analogy, perhaps, quite as much as the feeling that he would be unwelcome in the Long Dragon, that drove him out after supper into the lane

beyond the gasworks, to rehearse a few miracles in private.

There was possibly a certain want of originality in his attempts, for apart from his willpower Mr. Fotheringay was not a very exceptional man. The miracle of Moses' rod came to his mind, but the night was dark and unfavorable to the proper control of large miraculous snakes. Then he recollected the story of "Tannhäuser" that he had read on the back of the Philharmonic program. That seemed to him singularly attractive and harmless. He stuck his walking stick—a very nice Poona-Penang lawyer—into the turf that edged the foot path, and commanded the dry wood to blossom. The air was immediately full of the scent of roses, and by means of a match he saw for himself that this beautiful miracle was indeed accomplished. His satisfaction was ended by advancing footsteps. Afraid of a premature discovery of his powers, he addressed the blossoming stick hastily: "Go back." What he meant was "Change back"; but of course he was confused. The stick receded at a considerable velocity, and incontinently came a cry of anger and a bad word from the approaching person. "Who are you throwing brambles at, you fool?" cried a voice. "That got me on the shin."

"I'm sorry, old chap," said Mr. Fotheringay, and then, realizing the awkward nature of the explanation, caught nervously at his mustache. He saw Winch, one of the three Immering constables, advancing.

"What d'yer mean by it?" asked the constable. "Hullo! It's you, is it? The gent that broke the lamp at the Long Dragon!"

"I don't mean anything by it," said Mr. Fotheringay. "Nothing at all."

"What d'yer do it for then?"

"Oh, bother!" said Mr. Fotheringay.

"Bother, indeed? D'yer know that stick hurt? What d'yer do it for, eh?"

For the moment Mr. Fotheringay could not think what he had done it for. His silence seemed to irritate Mr. Winch. "You've been assaulting the police, young man, this time. That's what *you* done!"

"Look here, Mr. Winch," said Mr. Fotheringay, annoyed and confused, "I'm very sorry. The fact is—"

"Well!"

He could not think of no way but the truth. "I was working a miracle." He tried to speak in an offhand way, but try as he would he couldn't.

"Working a—! 'Ere, don't you talk rot. Working a miracle, indeed! Miracle! Well, that's downright funny! Why, you's the chap that

don't believe in miracles. . . . Fact is, this is another of your silly conjuring tricks—that's what this is. Now, I tell you—"

But Mr. Fotheringay never heard what Mr. Winch was going to tell him. He realized he had given himself away, flung his valuable secret to all the winds of heaven. A violent gust of irritation swept him to action. He turned on the constable swiftly and fiercely. "Here," he said, "I've had enough of this, I have! I'll show you a silly conjuring trick, I will. Go to Hades! Go, now!"

He was alone!

Mr. Fotheringay performed no more miracles that night nor did he trouble to see what had become of his flowering stick. He returned to the town, scared and very quiet, and went to his bedroom. "Lord!" he said, "it's a powerful gift—an extremely powerful gift! I didn't hardly mean as much as that. Not really. . . . I wonder what Hades is like!"

He sat on the bed taking off his boots. Struck by a happy thought he transferred the constable to San Francisco, and without any more interference with normal causation went soberly to bed. In the night he dreamt of the anger of Winch.

The next day Mr. Fotheringay heard two interesting items of news. Someone had planted a most beautiful climbing rose against the elder Mr. Gomshott's private house in the Lullaborough Road, and the river as far as Rawling's Mill was to be dragged for Constable Winch.

Mr. Fotheringay was abstracted and thoughtful all that day, and performed no miracles except certain provisions for Winch, and the miracle of completing his day's work with punctual perfection in spite of all the bee swarm of thoughts that hummed through his mind. And the extraordinary abstraction and meekness of his manner was remarked by several people, and made a matter for jesting. For the most part he was thinking of Winch.

On Sunday evening he went to chapel, and oddly enough, Mr. Maydig, who took a certain interest in occult matters, preached about "things that are not lawful." Mr. Fotheringay was not a regular chapel goer, but the system of assertive skepticism, to which I have already alluded, was now very much shaken. The tenor of the sermon threw an entirely new light on these novel gifts, and he suddenly decided to consult Mr. Maydig immediately after the service. So soon as that was determined, he found himself wondering why he had not done so before.

Mr. Maydig, a lean, excitable man with quite remarkably long wrists and neck, was gratified at a request for a private conver-

sation from a young man whose carelessness in religious matters was a subject for general remark in the town. After a few necessary delays, he conducted him to the study of the Manse, which was contiguous to the chapel, seated him comfortably, and, standing in front of a cheerful fire—his legs threw a Rhodian arch of shadow on the opposite wall—requested Mr. Fotheringay to state his business.

At first Mr. Fotheringay was a little abashed, and found some difficulty in opening the matter. "You will scarcely believe me, Mr. Maydig, I am afraid"—and so forth for some time. He tried a question at last, and asked Mr. Maydig his opinion of miracles.

Mr. Maydig was still saying "Well" in an extremely judicial tone, when Mr. Fotheringay interrupted again: "You don't believe, I suppose, that some common sort of person—like myself, for instance—as it might be sitting here now, might have some sort of twist inside him that made him able to do things by his will."

"It's possible," said Mr. Maydig. "Something of the sort, perhaps, is possible."

"If I might make free with something here, I think I might show you a sort of experiment," said Mr. Fotheringay. "Now, take that tobacco jar on the table, for instance. What I want to know is whether what I am going to do with it is a miracle or not. Just half a minute, Mr. Maydig, please."

He knitted his brows, pointed to the tobacco jar and said: "Be a bowl of vi'lets."

The tobacco jar did as it was ordered.

Mr. Maydig started violently at the change, and stood looking from the thaumaturgist to the bowl of flowers. He said nothing. Presently he ventured to lean over the table and smell the violets; they were fresh-picked and very fine ones. Then he stared at Mr. Fotheringay again.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

Mr. Fotheringay pulled his mustache. "Just told it—and there you are. Is that a miracle, or is it black art, or what is it? And what do you think's the matter with me? That's what I want to ask."

"It's a most extraordinary occurrence."

"And this day last week I knew no more that I could do things like that than you did. It came quite sudden. It's something odd about my will, I suppose, and that's as far as I can see."

"Is *that*—the only thing? Could you do other things besides that?"

"Lord, yes!" said Mr. Fotheringay. "Just anything." He thought, and suddenly recalled a conjuring entertainment he had seen.

"Here!" He pointed. "Change into a bowl of fish—no, not that—change into a glass bowl full of water with goldfish swimming in it. That's better! You see that, Mr. Maydig?"

"It's astonishing. It's incredible. You are either a most extraordinary . . . But no—"

"I could change it into anything," said Mr. Fotheringay. "Just anything. Here! be a pigeon, will you?"

In another moment a blue pigeon was fluttering round the room and making Mr. Maydig duck every time it came near him. "Stop there, will you," said Mr. Fotheringay; and the pigeon hung motionless in the air. "I could change it back to a bowl of flowers," he said, and after replacing the pigeon on the table worked that miracle. "I expect you will want your pipe in a bit," he said, and restored the tobacco jar.

Mr. Maydig had followed all these later changes in a sort of ejaculatory silence. He stared at Mr. Fotheringay and, in a very gingerly manner, picked up the tobacco jar, examined it, replaced it on the table. "Well!" was the only expression of his feelings.

"Now, after that it's easier to explain what I came about," said Mr. Fotheringay; and proceeded to a lengthy and involved narrative of his strange experiences, beginning with the affair of the lamp in the Long Dragon and complicated by persistent allusions to Winch. As he went on, the transient pride Mr. Maydig's consternation had caused passed away; he became the very ordinary Mr. Fotheringay of everyday intercourse again. Mr. Maydig listened intently, the tobacco jar in his hand, and his bearing changed also with the course of the narrative. Presently, while Mr. Fotheringay was dealing with the miracle of the third egg, the minister interrupted with a fluttering extended hand—

"It is possible," he said. "It is credible. It is amazing, of course, but it reconciles a number of difficulties. The power to work miracles is a gift—a peculiar quality like genius or second sight—hitherto it has come very rarely and to exceptional people. But in this case . . . I have always wondered at the miracles of Mahomet, and at Yogi's miracles, and the miracles of Madame Blavatsky. But, of course! Yes, it is simply a gift! It carries out so beautifully the arguments of that great thinker—" Mr. Maydig's voice sank—"his grace the Duke of Argyll. Here we plumb some profounder law—deeper than the ordinary laws of nature. Yes—yes. Go on. Go on!"

Mr. Fotheringay proceeded to tell of his misadventure with Winch, and Mr. Maydig, no longer overawed or scared, began to

jerk his limbs about and interject astonishment. "It's this what troubled me most," proceeded Mr. Fotheringay; "it's this I'm most mijitly in want of advice for; of course he's at San Francisco—wherever San Francisco may be—but of course it's awkward for both of us, as you'll see, Mr. Maydig. I don't see how he can understand what has happened, and I dare say he's scared and exasperated something tremendous, and trying to get at me. I dare say he keeps on starting off to come here. I send him back, by a miracle every few hours, when I think of it. And of course, that's a thing he won't be able to understand, and it's bound to annoy him; and, of course, if he takes a ticket every time it will cost him a lot of money. I done the best I could for him, but of course it's difficult for him to put himself in my place. I thought afterwards that his clothes might have got scorched, you know—if Hades is all it's supposed to be—before I shifted him. In that case I suppose they'd have locked him up in San Francisco. Of course I willed him a new suit of clothes on him directly I thought of it. But, you see, I'm already in a deuce of a tangle—"

Mr. Maydig looked serious. "I see you are in a tangle. Yes, it's a difficult position. How you are to end it. . . ." He became diffuse and inconclusive.

"However, we'll leave Winch for a little and discuss the larger question. I don't think this is a case of the black art or anything of the sort. I don't think there is any taint of criminality about it at all, Mr. Fotheringay—none whatever, unless you are suppressing material facts. No, it's miracles—pure miracles—miracles, if I may say so, of the very highest class."

He began to pace the hearthrug and gesticulate, while Mr. Fotheringay sat with his arm on the table and his head on his arm, looking worried. "I don't see how I'm to manage about Winch," he said.

"A gift of working miracles—apparently a very powerful gift," said Mr. Maydig, "will find a way about Winch—never fear. My dear sir, you are a most important man—a man of the most astonishing possibilities. As evidence, for example! And in other ways, the things you may do. . . ."

"Yes, *I've* thought of a thing or two," said Mr. Fotheringay. "But—some of the things came a bit twisty. You saw that fish at first? Wrong sort of bowl and wrong sort of fish. And I thought I'd ask someone."

"A proper course," said Mr. Maydig, "a very proper course—altogether the proper course." He stopped and looked at

Mr. Fotheringay. "It's practically an unlimited gift. Let us test your powers, for instance. If they really *are* . . . If they really are all they seem to be."

And so, incredible as it may seem, in the study of the little house behind the Congregational Chapel, on the evening of Sunday, November 10, 1896, Mr. Fotheringay, egged on and inspired by Mr. Maydig, began to work miracles. The reader's attention is specially and definitely called to that date. He will object, probably has already objected, that certain points in this story are improbable, that if any things of the sort already described had indeed occurred, they would have been in all the papers a year ago. The details immediately following he will find particularly hard to accept, because among other things they involve the conclusion that he or she, the reader, in question, must have been killed in a violent and unprecedented manner more than a year ago. Now a miracle is nothing if not improbable, and, as a matter of fact, the reader *was* killed in a violent and unprecedented manner a year ago. In the subsequent course of this story it will become perfectly clear and credible, as every right-minded and reasonable reader will admit. But this is not the place for the end of the story, being but little beyond the hither side of the middle. And at first the miracles worked by Mr. Fotheringay were timid little miracles—little things with the cups and parlor fitments, as feeble as the miracles of Theosophists, and, feeble as they were, they were received with awe by his collaborator. He would have preferred to settle the Winch business out of hand, but Mr. Maydig would not let him. But after they had worked a dozen of these domestic trivialities, their sense of power grew, their imagination began to show signs of stimulation, and their ambition enlarged. Their first larger enterprise was due to hunger and the negligence of Mrs. Minchin, Mr. Maydig's housekeeper. The meal to which the minister conducted Mr. Fotheringay was certainly ill-laid and uninviting as refreshment for two industrious miracle-workers; but they were seated, and Mr. Maydig was descanting in sorrow rather than in anger upon his housekeeper's shortcomings, before it occurred to Mr. Fotheringay that an opportunity lay before him. "Don't you think, Mr. Maydig," he said, "if it isn't a liberty, I—"

"My dear Mr. Fotheringay! Of course! No—I didn't think."

Mr. Fotheringay waved his hand. "What shall we have?" he said, in a large, inclusive spirit, and, at Mr. Maydig's order, revised the supper very thoroughly. "As for me," he said, eyeing Mr. Maydig's selection, "I am always particularly fond of a tankard of stout and

a nice Welsh rarebit, and I'll order that. I ain't much given to burgundy," and forthwith stout and Welsh rarebit promptly appeared at his command. They sat long at their supper, talking like equals, as Mr. Fotheringay presently perceived with a glow of surprise and gratification, of all the miracles they would presently do. "And, by the bye, Mr. Maydig," said Mr. Fotheringay, "I might perhaps be able to help you—in a domestic way."

"Don't quite follow," said Mr. Maydig, pouring out a glass of miraculous old burgundy.

Mr. Fotheringay helped himself to a second Welsh rarebit out of vacancy, and took a mouthful. "I was thinking," he said, "I might be able (*chum, chum*) to work (*chum, chum*) a miracle with Mrs. Minchin (*chum, chum*)—make her a better woman."

Mr. Maydig put down the glass and looked doubtful. "She's—She strongly objects to interference, you know, Mr. Fotheringay. And—as a matter of fact—it's well past eleven and she's probably in bed and asleep. Do you think, on the whole—"

Mr. Fotheringay issued his orders, and a little less at their ease, perhaps, the two gentlemen proceeded with their repast. Mr. Maydig was enlarging on the changes he might expect in his housekeeper next day, with an optimism that seemed even to Mr. Fotheringay's supper senses a little forced and hectic, when a series of confused noises from upstairs began. Their eyes exchanged interrogations, and Mr. Maydig left the room hastily. Mr. Fotheringay heard him calling up to his housekeeper and then his footsteps going softly up to her.

In a minute or so the minister returned, his step light, his face radiant. "Wonderful!" he said, "and touching! Most touching!"

He began pacing the hearthrug. "A repentance—a most touching repentance—through the crack of the door. Poor woman! A most wonderful change! She had got up. She must have got up at once. She had got up out of her sleep to smash a private bottle of brandy in her box. And to confess it, too! . . . But this gives us—it opens—a most amazing vista of possibilities. If we can work this miraculous change in *her* . . ."

"The thing's unlimited seemingly," said Mr. Fotheringay. "And about Mr. Winch—"

"Altogether unlimited." And from the hearthrug Mr. Maydig, waving the Winch difficulty aside, unfolded a series of wonderful proposals—proposals he invented as he went along.

Now what those proposals were does not concern the essentials of this story. Suffice it that they were designed in a spirit of infinite

benevolence, the sort of benevolence that used to be called post-prandial. Suffice it, too, that the problem of Winch remained unsolved. Nor is it necessary to describe how far that series got to its fulfillment. There were astonishing changes. The small hours found Mr. Maydig and Mr. Fotheringay careering across the chilly market square under the still moon, in a sort of ecstasy of thaumaturgy, Mr. Maydig all flap and gesture, Mr. Fotheringay short and bristling, and no longer abashed at his greatness. They had reformed every drunkard in the Parliamentary division; changed all the beer and alcohol to water (Mr. Maydig had overruled Mr. Fotheringay on this point), they had, further, greatly improved the railway communication of the place, drained Flinder's swamp, improved the soil of One Tree Hill, and cured the vicar's wart. And they were going to see what could be done with the injured pier at South Bridge. "The place," gasped Mr. Maydig, "won't be the same place tomorrow. How surprised and thankful everyone will be!" And just at that moment the church clock struck three.

"I say," said Mr. Fotheringay, "that's three o'clock! I must be getting back. I've got to be at business by eight. And besides, Mrs. Wimms—"

"We're only beginning," said Mr. Maydig, full of the sweetness of unlimited power. "We're only beginning. Think of all the good we're doing. When people wake—"

"But—" said Mr. Fotheringay.

Mr. Maydig gripped his arm suddenly. His eyes were bright and wild. "My dear chap," he said, "there's no hurry. Look—" he pointed to the moon at the zenith "—Joshua!"

"Joshua?" said Mr. Fotheringay.

"Joshua," said Mr. Maydig. "Why not? Stop it."

Mr. Fotheringay looked at the moon.

"That's a bit tall," he said after a pause.

"Why not?" said Mr. Maydig. "Of course it doesn't stop. You stop the rotation of the earth, you know. Time stops. It isn't as if we were doing harm."

"H'm!" said Mr. Fotheringay. "Well." He sighed. "I'll try. Here—"

He buttoned up his jacket and addressed himself to the habitable globe, with as good an assumption of confidence as lay in his power. "Jest stop rotating, will you?" said Mr. Fotheringay.

Incontinently he was flying head over heels through the air at the rate of dozens of miles a minute. In spite of the innumerable circles he was describing per second, he thought; for thought is wonderful—sometimes as sluggish as flowing pitch, sometimes as

instantaneous as light. He thought in a second, and willed. "Let me come down safe and sound. Whatever else happens, let me down safe and sound."

He willed it only just in time, for his clothes, heated by his rapid flight through the air, were already beginning to singe. He came down with a forcible but by no means injurious bump in what appeared to be a mound of fresh-turned earth. A large mass of metal and masonry, extraordinarily like the clock tower in the middle of the market square, hit the earth near him, ricocheted over him, and flew into stonework, bricks, and masonry, like a bursting bomb. A hurtling cow hit one of the larger blocks and smashed like an egg. There was a crash that made all the most violent crashes of his past life seem like the sound of falling dust, and this was followed by a descending series of lesser crashes. A vast wind roared throughout earth and heaven, so that he could scarcely lift his head to look. For a while he was too breathless and astonished even to see where he was or what had happened. And his first movement was to feel his head and reassure himself that his streaming hair was still his own.

"Lord!" gasped Mr. Fotheringay, scarce able to speak for the gale. "I've had a squeak! What's gone wrong? Storms and thunder. And only a minute ago a fine night. It's Maydig set me on to this sort of thing. *What a wind!* If I go on fooling in this way I'm bound to have a thundering accident!"

"Where's Maydig?"

"What a confounded mess everything's in!"

He looked about him so far as his flapping jacket would permit. The appearance of things was really extremely strange. "The sky's all right anyhow," said Mr. Fotheringay. "And that's about all that is right. And even there it looks like a terrific gale coming up. But there's the moon overhead. Just as it was just now. Bright as mid-day. But as for the rest—Where's the village? Where's—where's anything? And what on earth set this wind a-blowing? *I didn't order no wind.*"

Mr. Fotheringay struggled to get to his feet in vain, and after one failure, remained on all fours, holding on. He surveyed the moonlit world to leeward, with the tails of his jacket streamlining over his head. "There's something seriously wrong," said Mr. Fotheringay. "And what it is—goodness knows."

Far and wide nothing was visible in the white glare through the haze of dust that drove before a screaming gale but tumbled masses of earth and heaps of inchoate ruins, no trees, no houses, no familiar

shapes, only a wilderness of disorder vanishing at last into the darkness beneath the whirling columns and streamers, the lightnings and thunderings of a swiftly rising storm. Near him in the livid glare was something that might once have been an elm tree, a smashed mass of splinters, shivered from boughs to base, and further a twisted mass of iron girders—only too evidently the viaduct—rose out of the piled confusion.

You see, when Mr. Fotheringay had arrested the rotation of the solid globe, he had made no stipulation concerning the trifling movables upon its surface. And the earth spins so fast that the surface at its equator is traveling at rather more than half that pace. So that the village, and Mr. Maydig, and Mr. Fotheringay, and everybody and everything had been jerked violently forward at about nine miles per second that is to say, much more violently than if they had been fired out of a cannon. And every human being, every living creature, every house, and every tree—all the world as we know it—had been so jerked and smashed and utterly destroyed. That was all.

These things Mr. Fotheringay did not, of course, fully appreciate. But he perceived that his miracle had miscarried, and with that a great disgust of miracles came upon him. He was in darkness now, for the clouds had swept together and blotted out his momentary glimpse of the moon, and the air was full of fitful struggling tortured wraiths of hail. A great roaring of wind and waters filled earth and sky, and, peering under his hand through the dust and sleet to windward, he saw by the play of the lightnings a vast wall of water pouring towards him.

"Maydig!" screamed Mr. Fotheringay's feeble voice amid the elemental uproar. "Here!—Maydig!"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Fotheringay to the advancing water. "Oh, for goodness' sake, stop!"

"Just a moment," said Mr. Fotheringay to the lightnings and thunder. "Stop just a moment while I collect my thoughts. . . . And now what shall I do?" he said. "What *shall* I do? Lord! I wish Maydig was about."

"I know," said Mr. Fotheringay. "And for goodness' sake let's have it right *this* time."

He remained on all fours, leaning against the wind, very intent to have everything right.

"Ah!" he said. "Let nothing what I'm going to order happen until I say 'Off' . . . Lord! I wish I'd thought of that before!"

He lifted his little voice against the whirlwind, shouting louder

and louder in the vain desire to hear himself speak. "Now then!—here goes! Mind about that what I said just now. In the first place, when all I've got to say is done, let me lose my miraculous power, let my will become just like anybody else's will, and all these dangerous miracles be stopped. I don't like them. I'd rather I didn't work 'em. Ever so much. That's the first thing. And the second is—let me be back just before the miracles begin; let everything be just as it was before that blessed lamp turned up. It's a big job, but it's the last. Have you got it? No more miracles, everything as it was—me back in the Long Dragon just before I drank my half pint. That's it! Yes."

He dug his fingers into the mould, closed his eyes, and said "Off!"

Everything became perfectly still. He perceived that he was standing erect.

"So you say," said a voice.

He opened his eyes. He was in the bar of the Long Dragon, arguing about miracles with Toddy Beamish. He had a vague sense of some great thing forgotten that instantaneously passed. You see, except for the loss of his miraculous power, everything was back as it had been; his mind and memory therefore were now just as they had been at the time when this story began. So that he knew absolutely nothing of all that is told here, knows nothing of all that is told here to this day. And among other things, of course, he still did not believe in miracles.

"I tell you that miracles, properly speaking, can't possibly happen," he said, "whatever you like to hold. And I'm prepared to prove it up to the hilt."

"That's what you think," said Toddy Beamish, and "Prove it if you can."

"Looky here, Mr. Beamish," said Mr. Fotheringay. "Let us clearly understand what a miracle is. It's something contrariwise to the course of nature done by power of Will . . ."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Jim Gulsen

There's plenty of action as Samantha Adams dives into her first big investigative reporting assignment since she's returned home to Atlanta. She wants to expose the notoriously widespread corruption of county sheriffs. Her retired lawyer uncle, her city desk editor, even her former high school sweetheart (who's grown up to become medical examiner) all warn Sam that she's been on the West Coast too long: she's forgotten how the South works, how powerful those good ole boys really are. She ignores their warnings, at the same time nosing around the unexplained disappearance of a senior partner in her uncle's former law firm, the most prestigious in Atlanta. Sam's encounters with the partners and their spouses, the city's elite inner social circle, reassure her that she hasn't lost her touch. She can still play Southern belle games with the best of them. Then the two "cases" begin to converge—and Sam's gross underestimation of both these indigenous Southern groups almost costs her her life. Alice Storey's **First Kill All the Lawyers** (Pocket Books, \$3.50, 220 pp.) compellingly mixes real danger, romance, and a nifty plot into a heady, magnolia-scented whodunit.

Donald Ward's first novel, **Death Takes the Stage** (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 248 pp.) introduces us to a cast of characters readers won't soon forget. Set in Hollywood, much of the action centers around a rundown nonprofit theater, the Quest, where an aged stunt man

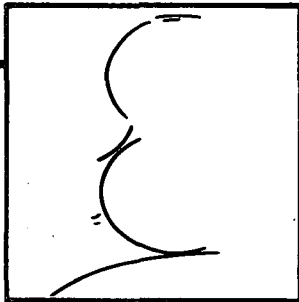
is producing short-lived runs of the classics (starring himself); where his floozy wife, once one of Esther Williams's back-up bathing beauties, now changes her wigs daily; where two twisted teenagers live beneath the stage; and where a guitar-toting, vegetarian *artiste* celebrates her art in musical versions of the David and Goliath story—set in the Old West, of course. Enter Jake Weissman, impoverished actor's agent, who agrees to hang out around the Quest as part of his investigation into the torture-murder of Billie, once one of Jake's clients. Why is Jake investigating, you might ask. (He certainly asks himself that question more than once.) Because Billie's lover, a thoroughly lovable hunk named Arnie, "hires" Jake, and Jake discovers that he has difficulty turning Arnie down. Throw in Jake's new secretary, an illegal Mexican and self-styled vamp, an ingenuous box-office worker named Ginny, a sartorially perfect L.A. homicide detective, a . . . well, you get the picture, and I don't want to give anything away. Read *Death Takes the Stage* if you wish to laugh aloud, then sweat it out, with Jake and cronies. A crazier, more fun bunch you will be hard put to find elsewhere.

Backstage is also the setting for Kate Wilhelm's **The Hamlet Trap** (St. Martin's, \$3.50, 233 pp.), though in this case the theater is a successful professional repertory company in Oregon. At its head is the imperious, talented Roman Cavanaugh, credited for having literally created the institution decades earlier. But at the heart of the mystery is young Ginnie, his niece, the talented set designer—and the prime suspect in a backstage murder. Enter Constance Liedl, psychologist, and her private detective husband, Charlie Meiklejohn, hired by Ginnie's estranged grandparents to clear her. Constance and Charlie are the calm in a storm, an intelligent and compassionate pair very long and happily married. They make good company as they explore the motives for the murder—several long-buried. This is for lovers of crime novels well-crafted and strong on characterization.

Detective Aline Scott's beat is an island paradise, **Tango Key** (Ballantine, \$3.50, 338 pp.), but there's definitely trouble in paradise. A headless corpse—and the investigation and search for the killer—are told in tandem with a brutal story of an abducted woman's abuse and final deterioration into murder and madness. This is strong stuff, gritty and not pretty, and should be passed up by readers with weak stomachs. For those of you who appreciate a gut-wrenching storyline with hard-core suspense and thrills, however, *Tango Key* may be your cup of tea.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Take one down-and-out private eye who nips at the Wild Turkey a bit too often; add an animated femme fatale with more curves than Sunset Boulevard, a jealous husband who happens to be a rabbit, and a villain so creepy that he wipes a chalkboard clean with the empty sleeve of a one-armed war veteran. Mix the whole stew into Hollywood of 1947 and you've got **Who Framed Roger Rabbit**.

This amazing mix of real and cartoon characters on the same screen, by Disney's Touchstone Pictures, is more than a marvel of modern technology. It's an hilarious whodunit with the ingredients of a classic forties mystery.

In the film's postwar Hollywood, animated cartoon actors—Toons—are just like their human counterparts in the business but are considered

something of an underclass who live on the edge of the city in their Toontown ghetto. Roger Rabbit is a Toon player for Maroon Studios whose purpose in life is to make people laugh.

Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins) hasn't cracked a smile since Teddy, his brother and partner in the Valiant and Valiant Detective Agency, was killed when a Toon dropped a piano on him while they were cracking a case. Valiant, built like a fireplug and dressed in standard gumshoe garb—wide lapel suit, wide print tie, and wide-brimmed hat—has vowed never to take on another Toon case. But he needs the dough to pay his bill at the Terminal Bar, the joint where his too-good-for-him and longtime gal Delores (Joanna Cassidy) tends bar.

Roger's jealousy of his wife Jessica and Valiant's need for a quick cash fix find the un-

likely pair working on the same side after a rocky start. They've both been set up and the detective aims to find out why.

Roger is blamed for the murder of Toontown real estate mogul and gag company owner Marvin Acme, whom Valiant spied in Jessica's dressing room backstage at the Ink and Paint Club where she sings the blues. The private eye is made a patsy by R.K. Maroon, the same Cartoon studio head who hired Valiant to smoke out the gossip about Jessica and who stands to fatten his wallet with Acme's death.

Also investigating the Acme murder, and pointing an accusatory finger at Roger, is the aptly named Judge Doom, a man who happily admits he bought the last election. Doom has his own agenda for Toontown and hopes to get his way by using the dip (his own creation), a mixture of turpentine, benzine, and acetone that wipes Toons clear off the screen. Assisting Doom in his work is a pack of weasels.

Even though this story is played for laughs, with cameo appearances by such cartoon stars as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny, Daffy and Donald Duck, it's the search for a solution to the murder which holds it together. Without the unwinding of this puzzling tale, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is noth-

ing more than a series of cartoon yuks.

Bob Hoskins fits well in his role as hard-luck detective. He looks the part and manages to maintain a straight face in the face of all the animated lunacy that takes place. Christopher Lloyd is positively scary as the evil Judge Doom. And Kathleen Turner, in an uncredited role, supplies Jessica Rabbit with a voice that brings to mind a young Lauren Bacall.

If *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* were made as *Who Framed Roger Smith* or *Roger Brown*, with only traditional, human actors, it would still spin a satisfying yarn of jealousy, greed, and murder.



Private Eye Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins) tries to enlighten himself as to why his client, Roger Rabbit, was set up for murder in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

The 141 homophone pairs are listed alphabetically:

aide—aide	guest—guessed	rough—ruff
ate—eight	guise—guys	Russell—rustle
bald—bawled	hair—hare	rye—wry
baron—barren	hansom—handsome	seamed—seemed
bass—base	hay—hey	sea—see
bee—be	hear—here	sense—cents
beet—beat	heard—herd	sent—scent
bell—belle	heart—hart	serf—surf
blue—blew	high—hi	serge—surge
bomb—balm	him—hymn	sighed—side
bored—board	holy—wholly	sighs—size
boulder—bolder	horse—hoarse	so—sew
brake—break	idle—idol	soul—sole
bred—bread	instants—instance	steal—steel
brows—browse	knew—new	straight—strait
cache—cash	knight—night	style—stile
carat—carrot	knot—not	succor—sucker
cause—caws	know—no	sum—some
ceiling—sealing	lone—loan	sun—son
chased—chaste	lute—loot	swayed—suede
choler—collar	lyre—liar	sword—soared
Claude—clawed	magnet—magnate	tacked—tact
clothes—close	maid—made	tales—tails
coffer—cougher	manor—manner	tea—tee
cowered—coward	metal—mettle	tern—turn
coo—coup	mete—meet	their—there
copse—cops	mien—mean	threw—through
damn—dam	mind—mined	tied—tide
daze—days	minks—minx	to—too
deer—dear	muscles—mussels	toll—told
derring—daring	nose—knows	use—yews
do—dew	nun—none	vain—vein
doe—dough	oh—owe	veil—vale
ducked—duct	or—ore	vile—vial
fare—fair	paced—paste	villein—villain
fate—fête	pale—pail	war—wore
feet—feat	passed—past	wade—weighed
flecks—flex	patience—patients	waist—waste
flocks—phlox	pause—paws	weak—week
flour—flower	peace—piece	wee—we
four—for	peek—pique	wined—whined
frieze—freeze	prince—prints	wood—would
furs—furze	raise—rays	wrap—rap
gait—gate	real—reel	yore—your
gambling—gamboling	reined—reigned	you—ewe
grays—graze	rode—rowed	
grille—grill	rood—rude	
grown—groan	Rose—rows	

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by J.F. Peirce.

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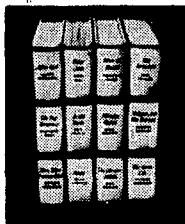
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